

Council of Europe Project
“Strengthening the capacities and skills of Belarusian journalists and media actors in
exile”

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RESEARCH PAPER

“No motherland. How refugees lose their homes but can't get a new one”

The role and responsibility of the Council of Europe in protecting freedom of expression has been underlined in the "Reykjavik Principles for Democracy", the [Reykjavík Declaration – United around our values](#).

The Project “Strengthening the capacities and skills of Belarusian journalists and media actors in exile” (the Project) addresses the needs and challenges of Belarusian exiled media community. The key objective of the Project is to support Belarusian journalists and media actors in exile, improve their capacities for unbiased reporting and reaching audiences at home and abroad, as well as strengthen the skills of both experienced journalists and newcomers – those who joined the profession while in exile.

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Introduction

This research explores the vulnerability and right to asylum of people who have fled Belarus and Syria due to political events. In Belarus, this relates to Lukashenka's repressions in 2020 and beyond, while in Syria it relates to the civil war of 2012 and the government change in 2024. These processes put many citizens in danger.

For personal safety, both groups of refugees came to the EU, where they are trying to obtain legal status - which sounds obvious - but success is sometimes doubtful and people are refused. The problem is described from two perspectives: in Italy from the Syrians side, and in Lithuania - from Belarusians.

What does the problem look like? Despite being the third most populous EU country with nearly 59 million inhabitants, Italian authorities processed only 6,010 asylum requests from Syrian applicants up until 2024. Of these, 4,850 were approved, resulting in a refusal rate of around 19.3%. Italy ranks fifth among EU Member States in terms of rejection rates for Syrian asylum requests, with only 0.7% of applications being granted.

There is another situation for Belarusians. Since 2020, 200-800 thousand people have left Belarus. Lithuania was one of the popular destinations and the Diaspora now includes up to 60,000 people. However, over 3,000 Belarusians in Lithuania have been deemed a 'national threat', some of them faced cancelling of the status via the court but some others did not - and both of them could be in danger. At the same time, people see the reasons to avoid documents confirming asylum or other kinds of protection because they believe that it increases risks and limits their opportunities.

Belarusians and Syrians have little in common - this is how they think, and how we all used to think, too. But they are far more similar than one could think. The risks faced by people who have fled their homeland stem from the same roots: they look suspicious for local authorities for various reasons. Ultimately, it could cost migrants their health or even their lives if they have to return to their home country.

Belarusians in Lithuania

Methodology

A Belarusian part of the research was made to learn the cases, mechanism and consequences of "national threat" statuses and weak points to work on. The research and data are made grounding on:

- Belarusian and Lithuanian media analysis on the topic;
- Migration department data analysis, including operative and annual reports;
- 5 case interviews, 3 of them with help of Human Rights Center "Viasna"
- Belarusian community in Vilnius
- Large thematic research
- Request to EHCR
- Master's [study](#) of Aurelija Vasilevskutė from Kaunas University in her 2024
- Monitoring against discrimination of Belarusians in Lithuania, NGO "Our home".

1. A man had to be deported while having risk of political persecution in Belarus

"It sounds like they are following a plan," says **Vadzim Hurkin*** from Belarus, a lawyer by education, who has twice been declared a threat to national security in Lithuania. Why?

Because of his experience working in the tax service, which the State Security Department in Lithuania described as being controlled by the KGB (Committee for State Security) of Belarus. According to Vadzim, the court did not obtain evidence of his personal affiliation with the special services, and he claims that this was not the case.

“If it's the KGB, then absolutely not, of course,” he says. Was there, say, any KGB agent among his colleagues that he knew of? Vadzim replies that no, there wasn't.

Ultimately, he was forced to move to Poland because, after the initial decision regarding the “threat,” his documents were suspended. He was given two weeks to leave Lithuania. It took a year and a half, around 10 court cases, and tens of thousands of euros in legal fees to have this status revoked.

Only after winning in the court, the man discovered one more detail which he did not know about – the court also declined the decision to deport him and ban him from entering the EU for five years. Usually, decisions are sent to a personal account on the MIGRIS (Lithuanian Migration Information System) website, but he did not any such a letter.

Did the situation pose any risks in terms of safety, threats to life or health?

“Of course, they could have deported me to Belarus,” he says, explaining that he very likely would have been arrested upon arrival (which is often [followed](#) by torture and lack of medical care, and sometimes even political prisoners [deaths](#)).

Vadzim considers himself to be at risk because during the protests he spent 15 days in prison under Article 342 of the Criminal Code on mass riots, refused to pay the prison maintenance fee of approximately 170 Belarusian rubles (60 EUR), and fled the country. After his departure, the district police department sent on his former home address two letters, and the court – three more. Vadzim also points out that his name is in the “Biesparadki” database (“Riot” in literal translation, a database of the Belarusian Ministry of Internal Affairs on all detained after uprising in 2020).

Vadzim now lives in Poland and has asylum seeker status – but why didn't he request the same status in Lithuania? It is a common practice – the formal status of migrants does not always reflect the presence or absence of threats to them, as explained in an [investigation](#) by the Lithuanian media outlet Delfi in June 2025:

“A source in the Migration Department said that, not wanting to claim themselves as political refugees, foreigners avoid seeking asylum so that they are not tracked down by Belarusian or other special services,” — the investigation [says](#).

2. 20 examples from three thousand verdicts

In total, the research revealed more than 20 cases, including both public and non-public ones. Some people managed to get decisions reversed: for [example](#), in February 2025, Viktor Jevilin successfully got back his residence permit and “threat” status in the Supreme Administrative Court was cancelled. However, there are other cases.

Some of them seem obvious: what if a taxi driver was [transporting](#) migrants without documents? This is a law violation. But what if a Belarusian army officer served for eight years – is he dangerous to Lithuania? It seems so – but what if he resigned before the 2020 protests, lived in Ukraine, and fought against Russia for six months?

We are talking about a specific person named Vasil Verameichyk. He travelled to Lithuania to visit his family, was banned from entering Ukraine, declared a threat to national security in Lithuania and banned from entering the EU.

He didn't want to go to a court and used to live outside the EU: Georgia, Vietnam, etc. From Vietnam, he was deported to Belarus and is now under investigation in a KGB prison. His relatives believe that the reason is his participation in protests and belonging to a Belarusian part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine which is claimed as a terrorist group by Belarusian authorities.

Let's look at the other professions:

- electrician at the Ministry of Internal Affairs for a few months; acquitted;
- bank call center employee;
- work at a nuclear power plant (directed after his university, it is mandatory and refusal can be followed by a fine equivalent to several dozen months' salary).

A former Nuclear Power Plant employee had his documents revoked and was given two weeks to leave Lithuania. He lost his job and his apartment security deposit, left for Poland, and applied for international protection. He estimated the possible costs of the court proceedings at €1,000-5,000, so he chose to appeal on his own. The trial was held in absentia, and in 2025 he discovered that it was dangerous - the criminal case against him was opened in Belarus.

Among Belarusians, it is commonly believed that Lithuania does not deport them to Belarus, especially by force. But another our respondent **Siarhei*** as a “threat” have got a visit of by uniformed officers who demanded to escort him back to Belarus. He fled to Poland and is currently an asylum seeker. Was he in danger in Belarus? Yes, he says: he faced up to five* years in prison. The Lithuanian court at the same time said he was not in danger, and so did those who came to deport him.

Why were his arguments ignored? The Lithuanian Delfi’s investigation [specifies](#) that the Migration Department does not assess the risks of persecution on an individual basis. Siarhei* sees one explanation in a conversation that once took place in the Migration Department's office:

“In 2022, I was recognised as a threat, and in 2023, an employee of MIGRIS said in a private conversation that his new boss (but not the head of migration) had given instructions to refuse Belarusians. In plain language, ‘There was an instruction to mow down Belarusians,’” he explains.

Another case, recently reported by the [Belsat](#) TV channel, is about a young man who faced criminal persecution in Belarus, swam across the river, and sought international protection in Lithuania. Later, he was taken to the Belarusian border, and the last information about him was published on July 15, 2025.

4-1. Who are the Belarusians in Lithuania?

The cases and data mentioned above are only part of the flow of migrants from Belarus to Lithuania after 2020 and 2022. Who are these people who have left the country? Most of them have work permits, but in some cases, they also face political persecution. Lithuania hosted both political migrants and businesses – Belarusian IT companies EPAM and Wargaming [were](#) among the leaders in terms of tax payments in 2024.

According to an analysis of [migration statistics](#) in Lithuania, between 2022 and 2024, Belarusians submitted 88,852 applications for residence permits. They were issued work permits,

humanitarian visas, and temporary humanitarian residence permits (under Article 40 of the [Law on Foreigners](#), Part 1.8, [explanation](#) on page 37).

Some applied for refugee status.

According to data from the Lithuanian Migration Department, there were approximately 57,511 Belarusians [living](#) in the country in 2024, most of whom have work residence permits. Only about a thousand have them on humanitarian grounds. Obtaining a so-called humanitarian residence permit in Lithuania requires a person to provide evidence of persecution plus a recommendation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs through a third-party organization (but such a document is not required when applying for refugee status).

According to data from the Migration Department, as of 1 September 2025, there were 1,093 Belarusians living in Lithuania with humanitarian residence permits, 36,616 with work permits, and 933 with study permits ([a total](#) of 51,213 Belarusians). However, [according](#) to **Vitis Jurkonis**, Director of the human rights organisation Freedom House Vilnius, there may be up to 10,000 Belarusians in Lithuania “*on the human rights line*.”

At the same time, as can be seen from the cases described above (and as [confirmed](#) by the Delfi investigation), the legal status of those who have moved from Belarus does not always correspond to the actual situation: people with work or student documents are also sometimes at risk of political persecution.

A humanitarian residence permit is a document that is not asylum in the full sense of the word but is still issued upon confirmation of experience or high risk of political persecution. Why are there so few humanitarian residence permits among the total number of Belarusians living in Belarus? Some Belarusians accept the risk of being arrested when traveling to Belarus, but do not refuse to do so because of property or family (and they are often being [arrested](#) for periods of up to a year).

Irina*, an independent journalist who has been living in Vilnius since 2021, explains:

“For example, many employees of companies that relocated, even under threat of persecution, drew up work documents - as if that were more reliable. That's why no one knows the real figures,” she says. Vitis Jurkonis from Freedom House [adds](#) that humanitarian residence permits were not the most popular because they used to be issued for one year, but now they are issued for three years.

Only a small proportion of those who moved received refugee status. More precisely, in September 2025, there [were](#) 843 positive decisions on asylum, with 1,248 applications submitted, according to annual reports. Although the review process should take up to six months, in reality it takes between four months and a year and a half.

Why are there so few people willing to apply for refugee status if most emigrants are likely to be political? This is a difficult period when, as our respondent **Alena*** put it, sometimes you want to “drink bleach” because of the high stress levels.

Alena moved to Lithuania after being administratively detained and is now awaiting the outcome of her asylum case. Is it dangerous for her to return home? She cites indirect evidence suggesting a high probability of criminal prosecution at home but adds that she is not prepared to make this information public.

She is unwilling to give her real name or city because she feels very vulnerable. “I’m so nervous that I double-check whether I’ve paid for my fare - I’m afraid that if I forget, I’ll get into trouble,” she says, adding that she cannot even open a bank account because she has no status.

Are Belarusians dangerous to Lithuania?

Are Belarusians dangerous to Lithuania - or, more precisely, does Lithuania consider them dangerous? No, and yes at the same time.

On the one hand, countries with a thousand years of shared history have a similar mentality, acknowledged Lithuanian Foreign Minister Vladislav Kondratovich in February 2025, [referring](#) to the problems with the legalisation of Belarusians in Lithuania. He noted the positive feedback from employers about Belarusian workers but stated that the large number of Belarusians in Lithuania could be used as a “fifth, sixth, or tenth column” at any moment. Therefore, he said, “these factors and risks” must be assessed, but “very calmly.”

On the other hand, Belarus itself and its political regime, as well as the migration crisis on the border with the EU, are forcing Lithuania to [respond](#) with a two-year state of emergency. Since 2022, Belarus has been assisting Russia in the war and later conducted military exercises.

More details on how they view relations with Belarus, are on the website of the Lithuanian State Security Department (VSD):

“Lithuanian citizens who frequently visit Russia and Belarus are [considered](#) vulnerable by the intelligence services of those countries. Their personal, business, and other interests depend on the decisions of the Russian and Belarusian intelligence services, because they grant permission for individuals to visit these countries, i.e. individuals depend on cooperation with the intelligence services.”

There are four times more Belarusians than Russians on the list of “threats to national security” – 2,936 Belarusians, excluding data for 2025, and 731 Russians.

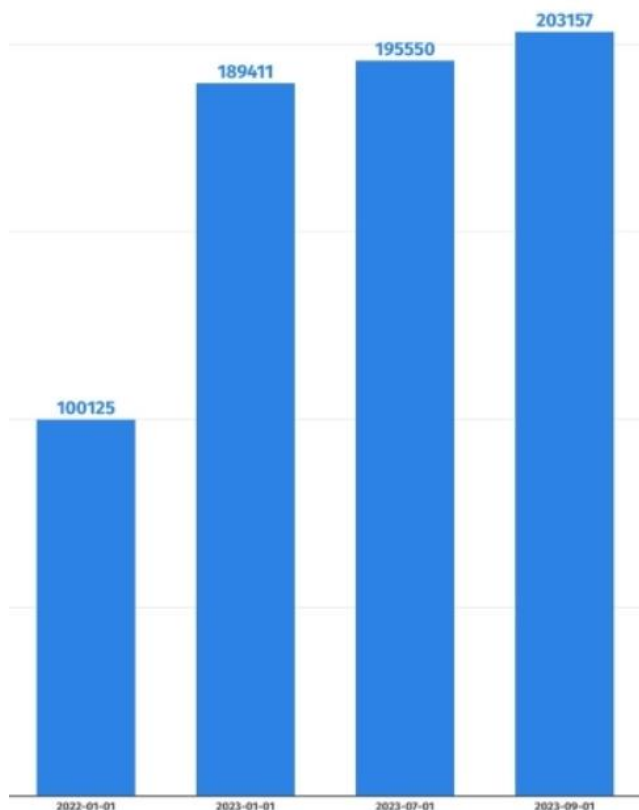
Is that a lot or little? It is a lot, considering that all these people were ultimately forced to leave Lithuania or go to court, either alone or with their families. Not much, if we consider their share in the total number of emigrants. As of January 2025, there [were](#) 217,988 foreigners living in Lithuania, including 77,080 Ukrainians, 57,511 Belarusians, and 14,978 Russians.

- Belarusians make up a quarter, or $\approx 26.38\%$, of foreigners in Lithuania.

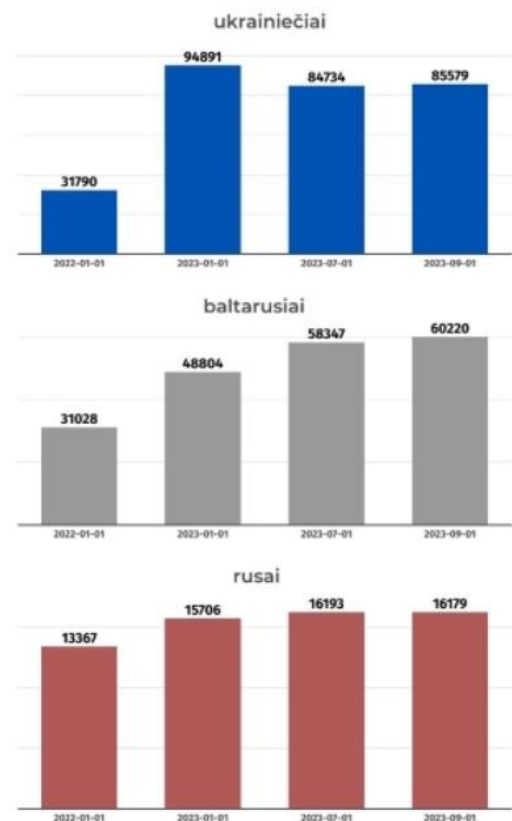
Looking at the absolute figures, it seems that Belarusians threaten Lithuania more often than Russians:

- In 2022, [910 Belarusians and 254 Russians](#) were recognised as “threats” (there were 48,804 Belarusians [in total](#), data published on January 16, 2023);
- In 2023, [1,428 Belarusians and 352 Russians](#) were recognised as a “threat” (there were 60,220 Belarusians [in total](#), data published on September 29, 2023).
- In 2024 – 598 Belarusians and 125 Russians were [recognised](#) ([size](#) of the diaspora: according to statistics from the Lithuanian Migration Department, as of July 1, 2024, there were 57,511 Belarusians and 14,978 Russians living in Lithuania);
- In 2025 – 97 residence permits of Belarusian were [revoked](#) as of June.

Lietuvoje gyvenantys užsieniečiai (iš viso)



Didžiausios užsieniečių bendruomenės



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Part 1 - foreigners in total over years, part 2 - Ukrainians, Belarusians, Russians over years. Photo - Migration Department, www.migracija.lt

The data for other years shows fewer coincidences; for example, the proportion of Belarusians recognised as a threat may be several times higher:

- In 2024, Belarusians made up approximately 1.04% of the [diaspora](#), and Russians approximately 0.35%.

In search of an explanation, the relative figures were analysed and noticed a coincidence. Despite the different sizes of the Diasporas, in one of the years the number of “threats” among Belarusians and Russians coincided to the thousandth of a percent.

- In 2023, Belarusians will account for approximately 1.5596% and Russians for approximately 1.5599%.

Incidentally, a [survey](#) on the same year showed that Lithuanians were willing to tighten entry rules for Belarusians.

4-3. Who do Belarusians pose a greater threat to - Lithuania or Poland?

But in general, Belarusians come more often to Poland than in Lithuania: at the beginning of 2024, there [were](#) between 120,000 and 300,000 Belarusians in Poland.

- In 2023, Poland [issued](#) 334,381 residence permits, including 59,627 to Belarusians (17.8% of the total number of residence permits issued).

At the same time, according to the figures, Belarusians in Poland are not the most dangerous group of migrants for national security, even though they have been the leaders in terms of the number of new migrants in recent years.

In 2023, 27 Belarusians were denied entry on grounds of national security (535 citizens of other countries were denied entry for the same reason; in the same year, 59,627 Belarusians were granted Polish residence permits).

The proportion of “threats to national security” among them does not reach one-tenth of a percent of the Diaspora, and their number exceeds the corresponding figure in Lithuania for 2023 by 53 times – 27 versus 1,428 in [MIGRIS](#).

4-4. Individual vs. mass protection

Belarusians are not the only ones losing their homeland. Although they are among the [leaders](#) in terms of the number of foreigners in Lithuania, along with Ukrainians and Russians. It was noted above that Belarusians are experiencing a lack of individual approach - but the approach to them can hardly be called mass, unlike in the Ukrainian case.

The conditions for obtaining protection for Ukrainians in Lithuania are simpler than for Belarusians, confirms master's student Aurelija Vasilevskutė from Kaunas University in her 2024 [study](#).

While Belarusians need to provide their own evidence, Ukrainians who moved to Lithuania after 24 February 2022, receive temporary protection status in a more mass mechanism, within the period between few days to a few weeks. [According](#) to UNHCR data, 89,560 Ukrainian citizens are registered in Lithuania, of whom about 45,000 actually remain under protection. Thus, the number of people under protection from Belarus and Ukraine varies significantly.

5. Why are Belarusians in Lithuania a vulnerable group?

At the end, Belarusians do not use refugee status or humanitarian residence permits as their primary means of legalisation, even in cases where there are grounds for doing so. Both types of documents prohibit visiting Belarus (and the principle of [non-refoulement](#) applies to refugees).

According to data from September 2025, 843 people were granted refugee status, and several hundred more were denied (1,248 people applied over a five-year period starting in 2020). Humanitarian residence permits were [issued](#) to either 1,093 people, or, according to another version, up to 10,000 people who arrived under the “human rights line.”

At the same time, it should be noted that there are tens of thousands of work residence permits. They do not imply the principle of non-expulsion and do not prohibit visits to Belarus — but, as noted above, their holders include people who are at risk of political persecution.

2,936 Belarusians have been recognised as a threat to Lithuania's national security (which means deportation within 14 days). Some of them (no exact numbers) face political persecution, threats to their lives and health through torture if they are deported.

Can those who are considered a threat to national security in Lithuania protect themselves from deportation if they face political persecution in Belarus? Only if they leave Lithuania before they are sent back to Belarus.

Finances also help to some extent. As respondents describe, this requires more than a thousand euros; the smallest amount we know of for a lawyer is around €1,300-1,500 (and the [average](#) salary in Lithuania is €1,407). In another case, the costs amounted to tens of thousands of euros, but the respondent still had to leave.

Why cannot one defend himself for free? Doing it yourself is ineffective, and there is [no](#) free state assistance at the appeal stage (which is necessary for “threat” cases).

It is also difficult to protect due to systemic violations of procedures, including those related to migration issues – problems are [noted](#) in the Lithuanian monitoring Seimas Ombudsmen's Activity Report for 2024-2025. In particular, it cites the case of a Belarusian woman who had been living in Lithuania since 2019. After 2022, the Migration Department sent her for verification by the State Security Department for “threats to national security” and violated the procedure for processing documents. As a result, her documents were revoked and she left Lithuania.

Presumably, one of the reasons for systemic problems and the lack of an individual approach to risk assessment is that the Lithuanian department is an “underfunded organisation.” It is worth noting that they [tried](#) to solve this problem by requesting additional funding in 2022 (and instead of €1-1.5 million, they received €323,000).

Do international mechanisms work? First, due to the circumstances described above (and also because of the amount of energy required to appeal), not everyone resorts to them. Nevertheless, having gone through all stages of appeal in Lithuania and having no hope for justice in Belarus, people with such cases sometimes turn to international courts. There are 16 such cases compared to several thousand cases of “threats.”

“In 2024, the Court received twelve applications against Lithuania submitted by Belarusian nationals concerning the revocation of their residence permits. Of these, two applications were declared inadmissible by a Single Judge formation, while ten remain pending and are awaiting examination, - writes the European Court of Human Rights Press Unit in October 2025. – In 2025, the Court has received four additional applications concerning the revocation of residence permits, which are also pending and awaiting examination”.

Among the publicly known rejected cases, this probably refers to the case of Volha Karach, who was [denied](#) asylum by Lithuania in 2023 on the grounds that she posed a threat to national security due to her alleged ties to Russian intelligence. Karach ultimately received a humanitarian residence permit allowing her to remain in Lithuania, while in January 2025, the European Court of Human Rights [rejected her appeal](#), deeming it inadmissible (“declared inadmissible by a single judge formation”).

Conclusion

The domestic political situation in Belarus and its foreign policy have triggered an exodus of hundreds of thousands of people over the past five years, and Lithuania has become one of the most important centres of Belarusian migration. Although the country was initially loyal, conditions are changing over time.

According to media polls, attitudes towards Belarusians in Lithuania have also changed. In 2023, a [poll](#) showed that Lithuanians were in favour of tightening entry rules for Belarusians. Later polls

in the media have focused on other issues, such as military training in Belarus near the border with Lithuania.

Conditions for Belarusians in Lithuania have changed since 2020. At first, the country actively accepted both political migrants and businesses - Belarusian IT companies EPAM and Wargaming [were](#) among the leaders in terms of tax payments in Lithuania in 2024. However, in April 2025 it was reported that the IT sector with Belarusian roots in Lithuania was shrinking significantly, with Wargaming leading the way in terms of staff turnover.

But in 2022, a new group of people at risk emerged – those whose formal status does not correspond to the actual risks of persecution. Sometimes these people (along with those who have not been granted refugee status) find themselves in a situation where they cannot remain in their country of residence but also cannot return home due to the threat of imprisonment and torture.

About three thousand people have already been identified as ‘threats to national security’ among Belarusians, and in 2023 their share among Belarusians and Russians coincided to within a fraction of a percent (1.55...%). One of the respondents claims that he was informed during migration about an unofficial decision to “suppress” Belarusians.

Attempts to defend their legal status are hampered partly by systemic problems and partly by the high financial and time costs of challenging court decisions at national and international levels. As a result, a vulnerable group of people are deprived of their homeland and have to choose between prison and tortures or life with no documents wherever they manage to go.

Syrians in Italy

The suspension of asylum applications by Syrian nationals in Italy and its implications for the European system of international protection

1. Summary

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has led to a massive migration flow towards Europe. Although Italy has been a key point of entry for these persons, the number of protection applications lodged by Syrian nationals has been minimal compared to other EU Member States.

On 9 December 2024, following the end of the Bashar al-Assad regime, the Italian government indefinitely suspended the procedure for examining asylum applications submitted by Syrian nationals. A total of 250 individuals have been affected, finding themselves in legal limbo.

The decision of the Italian executive has been strongly criticised by European and international bodies for contradicting the principles of international protection and for failing to take individual circumstances into account.

This study gathers the testimonies of several people affected by this situation. It presents the lived reality of these individuals since the adoption of the Italian government’s decision, highlighting the exclusion, stress, and lack of legal stability they face.

The report concludes with a series of proposals aiming to respond to this political situation in a manner consistent with fundamental rights and the principles of humanitarian action. It sets out many measures to be considered by Member States and the Council of Europe to avoid collective decision-making, to ensure access to rights, and to implement fair and transparent protection mechanisms.

2. Introduction

According to Eurostat data for 2023 concerning international protection in the European Union, a total of 410,000 applications were approved. Of these, 43% concerned refugee status, 35% subsidiary protection, and 22% humanitarian status. Syrian nationals accounted for 32% of all positive decisions, followed by Afghan and Venezuelan nationals.

In the case of Italy, 41,415 applications were examined during the same year, with a positive outcome in 50% of cases. Refugee status was granted in 24% of these. Unlike the general trend across the EU, the largest number of applicants in Italy that year originated from Bangladesh, followed by Egypt, Pakistan, Tunisia, and Peru. Syrian nationals were not among the 20 main nationalities seeking protection in Italy in 2023. According to Fondazione ISMU, fewer than 300 Syrian nationals were granted asylum in Italy in that year.

In absolute terms, between 2012 and 2023, Italy examined 698,000 applications for protection, 6,010 of which were submitted by Syrian nationals. Of these, 4,850 received a positive decision, corresponding to 86% of cases and representing 0.7% of all asylum applications examined in Italy during that period.

On 9 December 2024, the Italian government issued a circular announcing the temporary suspension of the examination of asylum applications submitted by Syrian nationals. In doing so, the Italian executive followed a measure previously adopted by other EU Member States such as Germany, France, Austria, and the Netherlands. According to UNHCR Italy, the measure has frozen the procedures of approximately 250 individuals.

In taking this decision, the Italian government relied on Directive 2013/32/EU and Legislative Decree No 25/2008, which allow Member States - in this case Italy - to postpone the conclusion of the examination procedure for asylum applications where the competent authority is unable to reach that decision within the prescribed time limits due to an uncertain situation in the country of origin, or where the examination of the application involves complex factual and legal assessments. In such cases, the Member State must inform all people concerned as well as the European Commission. The suspension may be maintained for a maximum period of 21 months.

On 8 December 2024, the Syrian regime, led by the al-Assad family for over five decades, collapsed. The armed group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the main opposition force governing the Idlib region, seized the areas previously under regime control and subsequently announced its takeover of the country. Since then, Syria has been headed by Ahmed Al-Charaa, who, through a transitional government, led the country to hold its first parliamentary elections since the fall of the al-Assad regime on 5 October 2025.

International organizations such as UNHCR Italy, Amnesty International Italy, and the European Commission described the decision of the Italian executive as premature, arguing that sufficient safety conditions were not yet in place for Syria to be regarded as a safe country of origin.

3. Methodology

Following the announcement made by the Italian government on 9 December 2024 concerning the indefinite suspension of all evaluations for the granting of asylum to Syrian nationals, this study sought to understand the impact of that decision.

On the one hand, a search was initiated through networks of Syrian nationals with regularised status in Italy. At the same time, contact was established with the Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration (ASGI), a legal organisation specialised in migration issues, as well as with the organisation Along the Balkan Route (Lungo la Rotta Balcanica), based in Trieste, which monitors and helps migrants entering Italy via the Balkan Route.

In parallel, contact was made with the coordinators of the project Siriani in Transito, launched in Milan in 2015, coinciding with the peak in arrivals of Syrian nationals to Italy. The project focuses on documenting the situation of Syrians residing in the vicinity of Milan's main railway station. The Municipality of Milan established several housing facilities in the city to accommodate this population in transit.

The study also engaged with the social media group "Siriani in Italia", through which several individuals whose asylum applications have been frozen and who are awaiting further information were identified. In total, three persons were interviewed - two women and one man - who have been directly affected by the decision adopted by the Italian executive. In addition, seven other Syrian nationals with regularised status in Italy were interviewed.

To gain a broader understanding of the context of Syrians in Italy, the study also gathered the testimonies of two persons who arrived in the country in the 1990s as economic migrants. Their insights helped to illustrate the limited presence of Syrian support networks within the territory. Furthermore, three individuals who reached Italy through humanitarian corridors were interviewed.

Finally, the testimonies of two persons who arrived in Italy by boat in 2015 and 2016, respectively, and who had initially sought to reach Germany, were also collected. These individuals remain in Italy pursuant to the Dublin Regulation, as they were first identified upon entering Italian territory and subsequently transferred back to Italy, which, under EU law, is responsible for examining their asylum applications.

4. Analysis

4.1. Evolution of Syrian migration in Italy

The Italian case presents a paradox within the European context in relation to asylum applications submitted by Syrian nationals between 2011 and 2025. While in most EU Member States Syrian applicants were systematically recognised as refugees — with acceptance rates exceeding 80% - in Italy, Syrians accounted for less than 2% of all applicants.

Tracing the evolution of Syrian migration to Italy since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011, the first arrivals did not occur until 2013, when boats began reaching the island of Lampedusa from Libya. The more affluent segments of the Syrian population who had fled in the early years of the conflict had mainly settled in Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey.

Before the outbreak of the conflict, the Syrian presence in Italy was minimal compared to countries such as Germany, Austria, or Sweden, where a large part of the political opposition to the al-Assad regime had already found refuge. This situation helps to explain the preference of many Syrians for reaching Central European countries rather than Italy. Another factor mentioned by Syrian interviewees is the limited employment opportunities in Italy, which made the country less attractive as a destination.

A further element influencing these migration dynamics was the announcement made by the German and Swedish authorities in 2014, declaring that all Syrian nationals who managed to reach their territory would be automatically granted refugee status. This statement prompted many Syrian families to travel to Libya, from where they boarded vessels bound for Italy.

The decision followed the publication of the widely circulated image of a Syrian child drowned off the Turkish coast, which had a profound impact on European public opinion and triggered widespread mobilisation of civil society, leading to a wave of solidarity among European governments.

4.2. The Role of the Italian Government and the Dublin Regulation

The situation became increasingly complex for the Italian authorities, as during those years faced a sharp rise in sea arrivals. In many cases, the Italian authorities failed to comply with their obligation to identify new arrivals, as stipulated by the Dublin Regulation.

Under that framework, people entering EU territory for the first time must be identified in the country of first entry, which then bears responsibility for examining their asylum applications. Consequently, any person identified in Italy but later continuing their journey to another Member State as Germany would be returned to Italy to formalise their asylum claim.

The Italian government's limited enforcement of this obligation allowed many Syrians to move northwards, mainly to Milan, where transport networks were established to facilitate onward travel to Germany and Sweden.

The Italian executive justified its reluctance to apply the Dublin Regulation as part of a political strategy aimed at exerting pressure on other EU Member States to become more actively involved in the management of migration flows in the Mediterranean. This position contrasted with a media discourse depicting the situation as untenable.

Although 2015 marked the peak of Syrian arrivals to Italy, most were able to continue towards northern Europe. As interviewees explained, this helps to account for the limited presence of Syrian networks currently in Italy. As of 1 January 2024, 6,714 Syrian nationals were registered in Italy, representing 0.13% of the total foreign population residing in the country.

The emergence of the so-called Balkan Route from 2016 onwards drastically reduced the number of Syrians arriving by sea. Nevertheless, the image of Syrian migrants arriving on Italy's shores and concentrated around Milan's central railway station had a strong impact on Italian public opinion, reinforcing the perception that managing migration from this nationality represented a major challenge for the country.

4.3. The Syrian population residing in Italy

In recent years, the arrival of Syrians in Italy has mainly occurred through humanitarian corridors coordinated by NGOs such as Sant'Egidio and Operazione Colomba. Since 2016, Italy has received 8,344 persons through these mechanisms. These programs benefit vulnerable individuals residing in refugee camps in countries neighbouring Syria. Several interviewees arrived from camps in Lebanon, and in many cases entire families were able to relocate to Italy under these arrangements.

According to the accounts collected, beneficiaries of humanitarian corridors include persons with chronic illnesses, often children, who were able to travel safely to Italy. Upon arrival, they are immediately provided with documentation granting them residence rights in Italy. They may travel temporarily within other EU territories but are not entitled to settle permanently elsewhere.

Several of the interviewees expressed their intention to leave Italy, citing limited employment opportunities. The weakness of the Italian labour market, which also drives emigration among Italian nationals, has consistently made the country appear as a place of transit rather than of settlement for Syrians.

Another profile within the Syrian population in Italy consists of persons who were fingerprinted upon arrival but allowed to continue their journey. These individuals were later identified in other Member States and transferred back to Italy under the Dublin Regulation. Commonly referred to as "Dublin returnees", they are required to submit their application in Italy and, once granted protection, to remain in the country. Acquisition of Italian citizenship by Syrian nationals may take up to seven years.

As these individuals often arrive with their families, they tend to spend a prolonged period in Italy, during which they seek to find employment and establish social networks. Over time, this contributes to a reduced willingness to relocate to another Member State.

4.4. Profile and Testimonies of people affected by the Italian decision

Among the 250 individuals whose asylum applications were frozen indefinitely on 9 December 2024, many had begun their procedures up to two years earlier. The slowness of Italian bureaucracy meant that these applications had not yet been resolved and were thus affected by the new measure.

Some of those affected are students enrolled at Italian universities who decided to apply for asylum after completing their studies. They are often employed, highly educated, and fluent in Italian, and describe themselves as well integrated into local society. Although they might eventually regularise their situation, they report feeling abandoned by the Italian State.

Several interviewees stated that the situation has begun to affect their psychological well-being, as they have been living in constant uncertainty for eleven months. They lament the lack of information available both to them and to the lawyers handling their cases. Some originate from regions in northern, western, and southern Syria where security conditions remain unstable.

Several female interviewees indicated that returning to their country of origin would expose them to restrictions on personal freedom, including religious impositions incompatible with their beliefs, and could endanger their lives.

They considered the Italian government's decision to suspend Syrian applications hasty, a view shared by international organisations and legal experts such as ASGI, which argued that a five-year observation period would have been a more prudent approach to assess the country's evolution.

Interviewees expressed frustration at having to renew their residence permits every six months. This mechanism was designed to address bureaucratic delays in Member States such as Italy. In the absence of a final decision, the person may renew their temporary residence permit every six months.

However, the freezing of applications has left many in a legal limbo: renewals are no longer automatic, and each person must individually apply for renewal. Moreover, the lack of an administrative decision prevents them from initiating other procedures, such as applications for subsidiary protection or humanitarian status.

Had they received a negative decision, applicants would have had 30 days to lodge an appeal. Under the current suspension, this right is effectively denied, as individuals remain unaware of the status of their applications.

In addition to the stress caused by prolonged uncertainty, interviewees reported that they can no longer afford their legal representation. While awaiting the resumption of procedures, they must continue to pay legal fees, sometimes up to €200 per consultation, prompting many to suspend legal assistance until further notice.

Some employed persons could theoretically request a residence permit based on their employment contract, but the bureaucratic delays involved mean that if the process exceeds six months without renewal of the current permit, they risk falling into irregular status, losing their employment, and their right to reside in Italy.

With respect to support networks, most interviewees stated that they cannot leave Italy to visit relatives or friends abroad while their applications remain pending. The limited presence of the Syrian community in Italy further contributes to feelings of isolation.

An additional source of emotional distress arises from the attitudes of some Syrians legally residing in Italy towards those still awaiting decisions. The establishment of a new government in Syria, supported by a broad section of society - including some former asylum seekers in Europe - has led certain groups to regard new applicants as opponents or even traitors. Consequently, many of those affected have chosen to cut ties with other Syrians, fearing for their personal safety.

5. Conclusions

Firstly, the indefinite suspension of procedures for examining asylum applications following the fall of the Bashar al-Assad regime in December 2024 has left approximately 250 Syrian nationals in Italy in a legal limbo. The individuals concerned receive no official information, which generates distress, confusion, and a sense of abandonment. This lack of information also affects legal representatives, who are themselves unable to obtain clear guidance from the competent authorities.

People awaiting a decision must take the initiative to renew their temporary residence permits every six months. Normally, such renewals are processed automatically for applicants with pending cases. However, due to the current suspension, responsibility now lies entirely with the individuals concerned. This exposes them to the risk of losing their legal status should the renewal not be completed in time. This situation may be interpreted as a form of administrative pressure, contributing to emotional exhaustion and fear of falling into irregular status.

Applicants must also bear the costs of their own legal representation, with fees reported to reach up to €200 per consultation. Such costs are prohibitive for many and effectively limit access to justice. The lack of free or specialised legal assistance further aggravates their vulnerability.

While awaiting a final decision, these individuals cannot leave Italy or travel within the Schengen area. Their sense of isolation is compounded by the inability to visit family members or friends residing in other countries, leading to fragmented families. The combination of uncertainty, administrative delays, and isolation contributes to widespread anxiety and feelings of exclusion, particularly given the limited size of the Syrian community in Italy. These are, in effect, people forgotten by the system, left without adequate protection.

Although they are permitted to work and study, affected individuals are unable to plan their lives in the long term. Their employment stability is undermined by the uncertainty surrounding the duration of their status. Administrative resources remain limited, and there are no specific programs for people whose asylum procedures have been suspended.

Even though the United Nations and the European Union do not consider Syria a safe country, the Italian government has justified its decision on the grounds that the country is in a transitional phase and moving towards stability. This position contradicts European standards on international protection and undermines the fundamental rights of the people concerned.

The government's decision appears primarily driven by political and communicative considerations. On the one hand, it signals to Syrians abroad that Italy is no longer a destination country. On the other it seeks to convey to the Italian public the message that the government is taking effective action to curb migration. This narrative has been reinforced through media portrayals of Syrian migration in Italy since 2013.

While several European governments have begun to describe Syria as a safe country, the ongoing hostilities in the south, the presence of Islamist groups in the north, and ethnic tensions in various regions demonstrate that safety conditions are not uniform. The diversity of the Syrian population calls for individual assessment of each case. The current policy is therefore unjust and arbitrary, and incompatible with the principles of international and European protection frameworks.

6. Recommendations

The European Union and its Member States should be urged not to apply collective suspensions of asylum procedures based on nationality or general political circumstances, without carrying out individual assessments of each case. As signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Member States are bound to examine the specific risk faced by each applicant.

A concrete measure would be the publication of a communication setting out guidelines and a model framework for conducting individual interviews and urgent training sessions for members of territorial commissions responsible for asylum evaluation.

At the same time, the relevant authorities should be required to inform all affected people in writing, within the prescribed deadlines, and to guarantee access to appeal procedures. This measure seeks to mitigate psychosocial harm and prevent further situations of vulnerability. Transparency reduces distress. To this end, it is proposed to develop a standardized notification template and to establish dedicated telephone lines, equipped with translation services, to provide information and clarification. These mechanisms should be complemented by annual audits to evaluate their effectiveness and proper functioning.

The Council of Europe should encourage Member States to put in place alternative protection mechanisms enabling affected individuals to exercise their fundamental rights, including access to stable employment, healthcare, and education, as well as automatic renewal of residence permits while the situation remains unresolved. In this respect, Member States should be encouraged to implement the existing Council of Europe guidelines and to benefit from technical assistance mechanisms facilitating their application.

Furthermore, States should ensure the provision of free legal assistance to individuals whose applications have been suspended and promote the existence of organizations capable of offering such services with European funding support. Specific grants should be made available to NGOs, existing legal aid organizations should be strengthened, and specialized training on the Syrian context should be developed for lawyers and legal practitioners.

Particular attention should be given to vulnerable individuals, who should be identified and provided with housing, mental health support, and specific protection measures. This is especially important in the case of women at risk of violence or sexual exploitation. Specific protocols should be developed to assist Syrian women in this situation, accompanied by increased financial resources for implementing targeted programs.

The Council of Europe should remind Member States that collective returns are prohibited, particularly in relation to countries not considered safe. Any form of pressure to issue collective or arbitrary decisions must be subject to sanction or review. Continuous monitoring mechanisms should be established for cases in which a State adopts collective measures affecting individual rights.

Member States should be guided to act in line with EU and UN recommendations concerning the situation of the Syrian population. In this respect, the creation of joint working groups between the Council of Europe, Member States, and United Nations agencies should be promoted, with a

view to gathering information on security conditions in Syria, assessing local safety contexts, and implementing humanitarian assistance and rehabilitation plans.

A panel of experts composed of NGOs, institutional actors, and representatives of civil society should be established to monitor the situation in Syria and to produce independent periodic reports on the impact of procedural suspensions on the health, employment, education, and family reunification of affected persons.

Finally, the Council of Europe should encourage Italian media outlets, in cooperation with NGOs specialising in migration and the Syrian population, to launch public information campaigns. These initiatives would aim to raise awareness among the Italian public about the situation in Syria and the reality faced by its people, while helping to counter misinformation and reduce stigma.