

The role of national parliaments in addressing the challenges faced by the Belarusians in exile - The Luxembourg solutions,

Luxembourg, 6 June 2024

Speech by Theodoros Rousopoulos
President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

Dear Minister for Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg,

Dear Vice-President of the Chamber of Deputies,

Madam Tsikhanouskaya, Leader of the Belarus democratic forces,

Dear Paul Galles,

Excellencies, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank the Luxembourg Parliament for hosting this important event. I would also like to thank our member, Paul Galles, for organising it. The conference has a strong and symbolic title, "Luxembourg Solutions." Its goal is to provide practical guidance for the national parliaments of Member States of the Council of Europe on how to address the challenges faced by Belarusians in exile.

The word "exile" is scary. It suggests a sudden, involuntary departure from one's homeland-a forced departure. From now on, one has to rely only on memory and words to transfer one's cultural and emotional heritage to one's children. It is terrifying.

Four years ago, on 29 May, your husband, Ms Tsikhanouskaya, was taken into custody while collecting signatures on a square in Hrodna. This was broadcast live on TV. This moment marked the start of mass repression in Belarus.

Four years later, there are 1,400 political prisoners, and the level of repression is unprecedented and is intensifying at an alarming rate. I know that a trial against 20 people has just opened in Minsk. It targets university teachers, analytic experts and journalists just for their opinions on democratic Belarus. Also criminal proceedings have been brought against 104 Belarusians who took part in Freedom Day demonstrations around the world (on 25 March 2024).

The police went to the homes of their relatives, and some of them had their property seized.(fyi the flat belonging to Sviatlana and Sergey Tsikhanouskiye was seized by the police and sold for 80,000 euros). And I know that one of today's sessions will be dedicated to the security threats posed to the relatives of those in exile. I look forward to the panel discussion on reprisals at home.

The repression by the regime of Aliaksandr Lukashenka forced several hundred thousand people into exile. They have found refuge in Council of Europe member states. In 2023, the Parliamentary Assembly became the first international organisation to draw attention to the fate of Belarusians who had to flee the Lukashenka regime. I would like to thank again my colleague, Paul Galles, for his initiative and the excellent report which addressed specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile.

From the outset, Ms. Tsikhanouskaya has invited us, in the Council of Europe and beyond, to think outside the box with the aim to "bring more Belarus into Europe and more Europe into Belarus." This is what we are trying to do today.

Members of national parliaments, representatives of ministries of foreign affairs, Council of Europe representatives, representatives of Belarusian Democratic Forces, and civil society - we have gathered here together to identify practical solutions. Solutions to ensure that Belarusians who have

found shelter in Council of Europe member states can live their lives as normally as possible.

In this context, I welcome the setting up of the International Parliamentary Alliance for Democratic Belarus in Berlin in November 2023. The Alliance represents hundreds of friends of democratic Belarus in parliaments around the world. It helps Belarusians and exerts pressure on the regime. I'm glad some Alliance members could join us today.

It's clear that democratic Belarus belongs in the Council of Europe. All the steps taken today prepare for the day when the Lukashenka regime will fall and the Belarusians in exile will be able to return home. We all understand that, for this to happen, Ukraine has to resist.

The involvement of the Lukashenka regime in the war of aggression against Ukraine is yet another piece of evidence that the regime is a danger to international peace and security.

The Committee on Political Affairs and Democracy remains committed to closely monitoring the situation in Belarus including with regards to the political prisoners.

While the main wish of most Belarusians in exile is to return to a democratic Belarus, the more time passes, the more distant this prospect seems. Removing the legal, administrative, and practical obstacles they face and providing support to Belarusians in exile should be a priority for the Council of Europe member states because a democratic and safe Belarus is part of the solution to security in Europe.

How can we help you integrate into the host countries while supporting your fight for a democratic Belarus? How can journalists, lawyers, teachers, doctors, and entrepreneurs pursue their careers abroad and thrive in their new professional environments? How can children integrate at school while preserving their culture and national identity?

What role can we all play against the intense Russification happening in Belarus? These are the questions which legislators have to ask and to which we have to find practical answers. I hope that each of you will return to a parliament and a respective ministry with a concrete roadmap to address the specific challenges faced by Belarusians in exile.

We have to create an equivalent, if not harmonised, level of protection for Belarusians in exile. We have to enable them to integrate while preserving and strengthening their national identity. Politicians and experts can find solutions, but we also need to do more.

Another platform is needed to create a space for dialogue, to fuel activism and advocacy. I am particularly thinking about artists. This is why I am so happy that our discussions will benefit from the testimonies and input of two of the greatest Belarusian artists: the award-winning writer Sasha Filipenko and the immensely talented Natalia Kaliada, Co-Founder and Artistic Director of the Belarus Free Theatre.

Dear colleagues, before I conclude my speech, I would like to reiterate that by helping Belarusians in exile, we help build tomorrow's democratic Belarus. The fight for a democratic and free Belarus must remain high on the agenda, and I welcome the decision of the Lithuanian Presidency of the Council of Europe to make it an underlying priority of the Lithuanian Presidency. Thank you for your attention.