



RESIST

Fostering Queer Feminist Intersectional Resistances against Transnational Anti-Gender Politics

The RESIST Project Report

Effects of, and Resistances to 'Anti-Gender' Mobilisations Across Europe: A Report on Belarus



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Belarus

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Executive Summary

In the wake of the August 2020 elections, the Belarusian government has harshly suppressed protests, many led by women, through excessive force and arbitrary detentions. Since 2020, the space for civil society has drastically diminished. Throughout 2021, government forces forcibly shut down, threatened, and monitored women's rights organisations, compelling many human rights defenders to either flee the country or cease their activities. The dissolution of most civil society organisations and the crackdown on women human rights defenders has left domestic violence victims without access to essential victim-centred services and severely weakened support networks for LGBTIQ+ individuals.

New legal amendments have further restricted freedoms, drawing international condemnation for human rights violations. Despite this, the Belarusian government continues its pattern of discrimination, with heightened hate speech, severe restrictions, and targeted harassment and violence against LGBTIQ+ individuals, feminists and civil society activists, often promoted by state media and religious institutions. Homophobic violence remains unrecognised and unprosecuted by state authorities, with more restrictive laws in development.

This case study, based on interviews and focus groups with 18 participants, examines the pervasive impact of 'anti-gender' politics on various aspects of the lives of people affected by it. Participants overwhelmingly associated 'anti-gender' politics with state actions, describing it as a tool for political persecution and suppression of dissent, especially after the 2020 protests. The state's discriminatory laws and rhetoric, often supported by the Church and conservative groups, target LGBTIQ+ and feminist activists.

The broader human rights crisis in Belarus further complicates the experiences of queer and feminist activists. Participants reported systemic police homophobia and a lack of legal protection for LGBTIQ+ individuals, with violent crimes often misclassified to obstruct justice. The state's 'anti-gender' rhetoric legitimises homophobic actions by law enforcement, contributing to a climate of fear and repression.

Participants reported feeling powerless and isolated, with 'anti-gender' rhetoric and discriminatory laws significantly impacting their lives. The government's use of vague legal provisions to penalise feminist, LGBTIQ+ activism and human rights organisations, coupled with state and societal hostility, has forced many activists, human rights defenders and queer individuals to leave the country. However, new forms of marginalisation, such as financial struggles and migrant status, continue to shape their experiences abroad.

Despite these challenges, activists remain resilient and determined to continue their resistance. Effective strategies include building networks with regions sharing similar political contexts, such as Central Asia and the Western Balkans, and leveraging social media to change public perceptions. Participants strongly emphasised the importance of solidarity, mutual support, and psychological care to sustain their activism and counteract the pervasive 'anti-gender' rhetoric.

Keywords: Gender; repressions; violence; homophobia; Belarus

Introduction

This case study explores the effects of 'anti-gender' hostilities in Belarus and discusses how individuals navigate, confront, and resist assaults on their identities, lives, politics, and work within the spheres of sexuality and gender. Given the extensive challenges that feminists and LGBTIQ+ people face in Belarus as well as outside of it, some of which will be detailed in this report, this case study puts the protection of participants first. Only two of our participants were based in Belarus, with most residing in other parts of Europe at the moment of the study. Participants were recruited through targeted emails to known contacts, followed by calls and emails to encourage participation. All discussions took place online and were not audio recorded. Interviews were fully anonymised to protect our participants. Extra protection was taken with the storage of data.

The report begins with an overview of the Belarussian context. This is followed by key points on the experiences of, and resistances to, 'anti-gender' from participants in one focus group (six participants) and twelve individual interviews (see [Table 1: Respondent profiles Belarus](#)). The study includes individuals with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations who are professionally involved in various fields, such as academia, law/human rights, online activism, feminist collectives, and education. Their rich conversations provide a wide range of experiences with 'anti-gender' mobilisations and how they resist them from within and outside of Belarus.

Context

Historically, Belarus was part of the Soviet Union until it gained independence in 1991 following the USSR's collapse. Since then, Belarus has grappled with defining its national identity in the context of strong Russian influence.¹ Politically, Belarus remains closely allied with Russia, with President Alexander Lukashenko maintaining power since 1994, often relying on Russian support.² Under Lukashenko's presidency, Belarus has witnessed a significant decline in political freedoms and civil liberties.³

During the summer of 2020, Belarus garnered significant international media attention due to widespread peaceful protests triggered by the contested re-election of Alexander Lukashenko and the harsh repression of demonstrators.⁴ These massive demonstrations, which included significant participation from women and queer communities, marked a decline in support for Lukashenko's 28-year rule.⁵ Women have taken the forefront in demonstrations against President Lukashenko's regime. Their involvement has brought significant visibility to the protests; women have become symbols of resistance.⁶ The 2020 Belarusian protests have spotlighted the critical roles of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals in challenging political repression and advocating for broader social change.

¹ Kazharski, A. and Lozka, K. (2023) 'Belarus-Russia relations: identity as product and factor' in Nizhnikau, R. and Moshes, A. (eds) *Russian policy towards Belarus after 2020: at a turning point?* Lanham: Lexington Books.

² Wilson, A. (2021) *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

³ Nikolayenko, O. (2023) 'Gender and repression in an autocracy: findings from Belarus', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2023D000000011>. (Accessed: 17 September 2024).

⁴ Belarus: Ongoing Searches and Arrests of Human Rights Defenders and Journalists, International Federation for Human Rights, 16 July 2021, available at: <https://www.fidh.org/en/issues/human-rights-defenders/belarus-ongoing-searches-and-arrests-of-human-rights-defenders-and-journalists>; Interview with Belarusian Human Rights Defender.

⁵ Korosteleva, E.A., Petrova, I. and Kudlenko, A. (eds) (2023) *Belarus in the twenty-first century: between dictatorship and democracy*. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group (BASEES/Routledge series on Russian and East European studies).

⁶ Fürst, J., Walke, A. and Razor, S. (2020) On free women and a free Belarus. A look at the female force behind the protests in Belarus, *Zeitgeschichte-Online*, September 22, available at: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/free-women-and-free-belarus>.

Activists then called for free elections, the release of political prisoners, and an end to domestic violence and recognition of women's labour, addressing the deep-seated patriarchal structures in Belarusian society.⁷ Additionally, LGBTIQ+ community members have increasingly participated, displaying rainbow flags and demanding an end to homophobia.⁸ Overall, as existing scholarship shows, these protests signify a broader movement towards mutual recognition and equality, extending beyond immediate political grievances to encompass fundamental social issues.

Following the protests, Belarus experienced an escalating crackdown on civil liberties. Protesters, journalists, and civil society members faced unlawful arrests, detentions, violence, and ill-treatment.⁹ Existing studies highlight how the Belarusian government has employed targeted gender-specific repression tactics to enforce political conformity among women, revealing deeper insights into state efforts to suppress civil resistance.¹⁰ Since 2021, the Belarusian government has forcibly dissolved nearly all independent non-profit civil society organisations, including those focused on women's and LGBTIQ+ issues. The international community, including the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International, has repeatedly condemned Belarus for its human rights violations against detained protesters, human rights activists and LGBTIQ+ individuals.¹¹ Despite these condemnations, the Belarusian government remains largely unresponsive.

At present, LGBTIQ+ individuals in Belarus are left without protection against homophobia. The country lacks anti-discrimination laws; no Belarusian legislation addressing discrimination based on sexual orientation exists.¹² The halting of work on the domestic violence draft legislation has also left Belarusian women who face violence without legal protection.¹³ State media and officials, including President Lukashenko, regularly engage in speeches stigmatising women protestors and LGBTIQ+ persons, contributing to a culture of intolerance and discrimination.¹⁴ New discriminatory laws are currently in

⁷ Sasha Razor (2020) The Gendered Dystopia of Belarusian Protests. A discussion of the crackdown on the women protesters in the wake of the pro-government forum 'For Belarus' which took place on September 17, 2020 in Fürst, J., Walke, A. and Razor, S. (2020)

Fürst, J., Walke, A. and Razor, S. (2020) On free women and a free Belarus. A look at the female force behind the protests in Belarus, *Zeitgeschichte-Online*, September 22, available at: <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/kommentar/free-women-and-free-belarus>.

⁸ Rust, M. (2020) The rainbow colours flying together with the white-red-white flags. The Belarusian LGBT community at protests, *New Eastern Europe*, available at: <https://neweasterneurope.eu/2020/11/10/the-rainbow-colours-flying-together-with-the-white-red-white-flags-the-belarusian-lgbt-community-at-protests/> (Accessed: 7 August 2024).

⁹ Hall, S. (2023) 'The End of Adaptive Authoritarianism in Belarus?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, 75(1), pp. 1–27. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2093332>.

Bekus, N. and Gabowitsch, M. (2021) 'Introduction: The Sociology of Belarusian Protest', *Slavic Review*, 80(1), pp. 1–3. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/slr.2021.27>.

¹⁰ Nikolayenko, O. (2023) 'Gender and repression in an autocracy: findings from Belarus', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2023D000000011>.

¹¹ Her Rights' Centre and ADC 'Memorial' (2020) The situation with human rights of women in Belarus following the presidential elections in 2020, 14. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1yMdbM6XsPYxLBYh5VuQ4fy1IXgzbfY/view>

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, OSCE Rapporteur's Report Under the Moscow Mechanism on Alleged Human Rights Violations related to the Presidential Elections of 9 August 2020 in Belarus, 5 November 2020, 35.

¹² See for example ILGA Europe's annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex people in Belarus, available at: <https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/2022/belarus.pdf>.

¹³ Nikolayenko, O. (2023) 'Gender and repression in an autocracy: findings from Belarus', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2023D000000011>.

¹⁴ Nikolayenko, O. (2023) p.7 'Gender and repression in an autocracy: findings from Belarus', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*, pp. 1–22. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1332/25151088Y2023D000000011>.

elaboration, for example, the Belarusian government recently announced the drafting of a new law punishing the promotion of 'non-traditional relationships'.¹⁵

With regard to the concept of 'anti-gender' politics, it must be noted that the concept was generally not well understood by participants. While some were familiar with the term through academic exchanges, training, and webinars, others had not encountered it. A few participants found the term 'anti-gender' somewhat misleading. BLRINT02 noted that it could be interpreted as an attempt to abolish binary gender divisions and oppose resulting discrimination. They felt it lacked explicit references to gender-based discrimination, marginalisation, and violence, making it appear utopian rather than discriminatory. Terms like anti-queer hostility, oppression, repression, and violence were seen as more nuanced descriptors for the situation in Belarus.

Findings

1. 'Anti-gender' politics is overwhelmingly associated with the state

Most participants associated 'anti-gender' politics with state repressions, discussing it in the context of human rights violations and absence of the rule of law

Participants emphasised that the state frequently proposes, discusses, and passes discriminatory laws, positioning itself as the primary driver of 'anti-gender' politics. BLRFNT04 expressed feeling overwhelmed by the state's discussion of discriminatory legislation, noting the frequency with which new discriminatory laws are being proposed, discussed, elaborated, or passed by the state.

Along with the state, the **Church** was identified as a key player in promoting 'anti-gender' politics, often intersecting with **state campaigns for traditional values and opposition to Western influence**.¹⁶ Various organised groups, including men's associations, anti-abortion groups, and far-right organisations, were also named as key actors in the 'anti-gender' movement. BLRFG1.3/INT04 cited effective 'anti-gender' organisations and alliances, exemplified by Matulya, a collaboration between the state [Ministry of Health], the Church, and the Family and Maternity Support Center. Matulya educates about the perceived threats of abortion and contraception. Their efforts led to the establishment of Belarus's first non-abortion zone in Lahoyusk in 2013. She said that while they as feminist groups were banned from displaying pro-feminist banners in public spaces, state-backed organisations display their banners nationwide.

Regarding LGBTIQ+ freedoms, most participants highlighted that diversity is inherently incompatible with an authoritarian regime, as diverse identities promote democratic values and threaten regime stability. As BLRINT01 said, "in a state where even basic human rights are violated with ease daily, anti-gender politics is a part of the same machinery".

Participants had different perceptions of the timeline of 'anti-gender' politics in Belarus. Most believed that opposition to gender equality and freedoms has a long history in the country, with gender-based discrimination and homophobia prevalent at both state and societal levels. Some participants noted an intensification of state 'anti-gender' discourse and homophobic statements around 2010, linked to discriminatory speeches by President Lukashenko, who referred to gender equality as "rubbish from the West", dismissing the draft law on combating domestic violence as a Western idea.¹⁷ Other participants

¹⁵ Radio Free Europe (2024) Belarus Proposes Draft Law Against The 'Promotion Of Nontraditional Family Relations', available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/belarus-proposes-law-against-nontraditional-family-lgbt/32826074.html> (Accessed: 16 June 2024).

¹⁶ belsat.eu (2020) 'These are our brothers and sisters. But we cannot approve of sin': Christians told about collecting signatures against LGBT values, available at: <https://belsat.eu/ru/news/eto-nashi-bratya-i-sestry-no-my-ne-mozhem-odobryat-greh-hristiane-rasskazali-o-sbore-podpisej-protiv-lgbt-tsennostej>, (Accessed: 4 July 2024).

¹⁷ Lukashenko Lambasts New Domestic Violence Bill, Belta, 5 October 2018, available at:

reported a rapid deterioration in gender equality and freedoms since 2018, marked by Lukashenka blocking a long-drafted law against domestic violence, which as BLRFG1.4/INT05 noted, created a climate of fear and uncertainty among women's organisations and civil society in general.

With the state being the dominant driver of 'anti-gender' hostilities, activists shared frustration about the difficulty to affect the change on a state level. Many see the state as an institution resistant to change, or as BLRINT03 said, "operating in its own separate reality". They described futile attempts in the past to collaborate with the Ministry of Health on improving gender-affirmative healthcare protocols. According to the participant, the existing procedure is outdated and restrictive, with the commission showing little interest in learning about trans rights or the experiences of trans people. The rigid binary thinking of the commission forces trans individuals to perform a specific narrative to pass evaluations, leading to trans people sharing 'correct' answers to stereotypical questions to gain access to healthcare. The same participant said the state was not receptive to their views at all.

2. 'Anti-gender' hostilities affect LGBTIQ+ people, feminists in different spheres of life

'Anti-gender' politics and its pervasive effects are experienced by participants across various contexts. They described that discrimination/oppression is not limited to the state, but manifests itself in different spheres of life.

Participants recalled different episodes of gender hostilities that they experienced in diverse spheres of life, to show that apart from the state, which is the main driver of 'anti-gender' discourse, there are also other actors and spaces fostering discrimination, oppression and marginalisation on the basis of gender.

Participants recalled experiencing hostilities in universities and medical institutions, citing episodes of academic silencing and shaming, and misinformation by healthcare providers. For example, BLRINT07, while writing her diploma on gender, mentioned eight gender identities, resulting in her ability to graduate being put under threat. The same participant detailed experiencing shaming in **medical institutions** by gynaecologists and obstetricians, where her diagnosis was mishandled, focusing on fertility rather than symptom management, in addition to which, misinformation was used to discourage her from even potentially considering an abortion. It was her ability to read and interpret medical articles available online in English which provided her with the opportunity to navigate misinformation and manipulation by healthcare providers.

Several participants said that they feel disturbed by a significant increase lately in funding for pro-life campaigns in Minsk, with more and more advertisements and materials appearing in public spaces and hospitals. BLRINT06 feels that this is an indication of an increasing investment in pro-life practices, and **fears that it is likely to be bolstered by future legislation**. She remarked that the state media perpetuates the idea that women's primary role is reproduction, discussing women's ovarian reserves on national television to foster guilt for delaying childbirth.

Sex-based rights groups, such as the Protection of Fathers and Children's Rights public association, which positions itself as a group which aims to enhance the social role of fathers and protect traditional values,¹⁸ and masculinists groups, such as Men's State were mentioned as other actors driving hostility and intolerance towards gender equality. BLRFG1.3 recalled how her feminist initiative, as well as some others, experienced intimidating encounters with such groups. She said that these groups were exerting pressure on them through conversations rather than direct physical threats. These were "unpleasant, confusing encounters" aimed at intimidating them.

<https://eng.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-lambastes-new-domestic-violence-bill-115411-2018/>

¹⁸ Protection Of Fathers' And Children's Rights is a public association in Belarus that advocates for the rights of fathers, especially in cases related to divorce, child custody, and family disputes. The organisation works to support fathers in maintaining their parental rights and responsibilities, as well as promoting traditional family values, according to their website www.zpod.by.

Participants also recalled diverse episodes of 'anti-gender' hostilities in the circle, where they would have expected to see support of equality and diversity issues. These participants were upset by troubling attitudes towards gender and diversity within **pro-democracy groups**. BLRINT01 mentioned that even within pro-democracy groups—referring to a social media chat—some members supported homophobic jokes made by the head of state, normalising 'anti-gender' discourses circulating in state media and political speeches. She was sad that inclusivity and equality were not yet seen by many as internal to a real democracy.

In a similar vein, BLRINT02 stressed that **gender equality and diversity should be seen as a test for democratic forces**, due to the manifestation of anti-feminism, misogyny, and homophobia within pro-democracy groups. BLRINT04 also shared that during the 2020 protests they, as a queer block in the demonstration, were afraid of **violence and hostility not only from police but also from protesters**: as "the ordinary protesters" marched, they were afraid of the police and of the armed forces. "When we were protesting, we [the queer block] were afraid not only of the police, but also of the protesters".

Many participants who left Belarus felt upset that the ideas of democracy strongly supported by many Belarusians abroad do not see gender equality and diversity as integral components of such a democracy. For example, BLRINT02 said that conservative pro-democracy politicians in Belarus and abroad also promote discriminatory ideas; she mentioned Zinon Pozniak, a symbol of the Belarusian revival, who has made homophobic and misogynistic statements in his proposed new constitution for Belarus. His conservative views envision a future Belarus structured around heterosexual men and women, whom he believes will restore the nation's glory. The participant felt upset that despite his extreme views, he is seen as a centrist politician in Belarus and remains highly visible, frequently invited to diasporic events in Poland.

BLRINT02 said there was also gender bias in the organisation and framing of diaspora conferences. Participants told us that initially, event titles and logos used masculine language, reflecting the marginalisation of women in these events. The same participant shared that one such logo was eventually changed thanks to strenuous efforts by female colleagues, indicating the continuing resistance by activists to 'anti-gender' also abroad. Participants added that the underrepresentation of female speakers at such events also remains a persistent issue.

3. There is a fear of state repression against women and LGBTIQ+ people

Participants spoke about diverse repressive measures used against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals in Belarus and the climate of fear they generate. Targeted repressions of women and LGBTIQ+ individuals, participants noted, creates an overwhelming climate of fear, and underscores the political regime's reliance on gendered violence to suppress dissent and enforce conformity.

Participants in the study discussed the various repressive measures against women and LGBTIQ+ individuals in Belarus, emphasising the climate of fear these actions generate. Following the 2020 elections, many activists **feared being arrested and sentenced**. As BLRINT06 explained, women and the LGBTIQ+ community have been vocal in political protests following the elections but also in anti-war demonstrations related to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Therefore, there is a pervasive fear of possible repercussions. Many participants described the escalating fear as more women and LGBTIQ+ individuals faced criminal charges and imprisonment, driving many activists to flee the country.

Most participants said that this fear has intensified with impending laws penalising the promotion of 'abnormal' relationships, for example, the anti-LGBTIQ+ propaganda law.¹⁹ This legislation, similar to Russia's anti-LGBTIQ+ policies, is seen as a broad tool to target political activists and those defending human and queer rights. Participants feared that such laws would silence dissent and exacerbate repression.

¹⁹ Another example that participants mentioned was the recently amended definition of pornography by the Ministry of Culture to include 'non-traditional sexual relations and/or sexual behavior'.

BLRFG1.3 said that they feared that this legislation's broad and ambiguous scope is expected to allow the state to target any activity as propaganda, silencing political activists and threatening those who defend human and queer rights, as well as those involved in issues related to childbirth, abortion, and contraception. Most participants fear that the anticipated anti-LGBTIQ+ propaganda law will target individuals who have voiced any type of political dissent.

With this, one participant is particularly concerned because of the anticipated lack of solidarity in resisting such oppressive legislation. BLRINT02 said that she is afraid that most cis-gender heterosexual people would not object to the new law, assuming it doesn't concern them personally, unaware that "it will backfire against everyone" as an instrument of repression.

Participants also fear that the new planned discriminatory legislation has a potential to incite enmity and stigmatisation, specifically social stigma, and **risking more hate and violence against the LGBTIQ+ community**. Thus, despite state repression, LGBTIQ+ participants spoke about the general increasing (**fear of**) **violence** and anticipated these in diverse spaces. Growing anticipation of violence combined with the disbelief in the effectiveness of reporting abuse and seeking justice, were said to contribute to a feeling of powerlessness.

Participants highlighted that the **fear of reporting abuse** is particularly strong not only amongst LGBTIQ+ individuals, but also among women with children, as the latter risk their children being taken away by authorities.²⁰ All of the women with children in our sample noted fear of this possibility, BLRINT01 referring to it "as one of the worst possible psychological violence tools" used to intimidate and silence women.²¹

LGBTIQ+ participants spoke about the futility of seeking police help, as it often leads to more harm from the authorities themselves. As BLRINT01 explained, should a queer person refer to police, they would have to explain in the first place why they are being stalked or harassed, and consequently be subjected to transphobia or homophobia from the police, including being exposed to police violence. Therefore, in their personal experience of being stalked and harassed during a prolonged period of time, they had to hide and withdraw from any public activity, even restrain from leaving the house, but avoided seeking police help. Several participants mentioned the use of repentant videos²² and other forms of police violence, with BLRINT01 emphasising that police homophobia is a systemic issue in Belarus. As she said, it "cannot exist on its own", it "is permitted by state policies and reinforced by conservative societal attitudes".

Most participants conveyed a prevailing sense of pessimism, **the feeling that things are only getting worse and that there is little hope for a positive change in the near future**. As BLRFG1.1 explained, new oppressive laws are being enacted, and statistics on domestic violence are not publicly accessible, leaving the true extent of the problem unknown. Fear, once confined to politically active individuals, has spread to nearly everyone, with vulnerable groups suffering the most. The interviewee feels that there is no chance for

²⁰ Various reports testify document instances of officials separating children from parents deemed to lead an 'immoral life', abuse substances, or otherwise fail to fulfil parental responsibilities, thereby endangering their children. See, for example a report by a Civil Campaign Our House: Issues concerning the rights of children in Belarus's legislation, available at: http://ucape.eu/pdf/Issues_concerning_the_rights_of_children_in_Belarus_legislation.pdf (Accessed: 14 June 2024).

See also The Advocates for Human Rights, Belarus' Compliance with the Convention Against Torture, 31 January 2021, available at: <https://www.theadvocatesforhumanrights.org/res/byid/8080>, 12.

²¹ Kruope, A. (2020) Belarus uses children to pressure dissenting parents: judicial harassment, threatened loss of custody, Human Rights Watch Dispatches, October 8, www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/08/belarus-uses-children-pressure-dissenting-parents.

See also: Khalip, I. (2020) In Minsk, the six-year-old son of the activists of "European Belarus" was taken to an orphanage, charter97.org, available at: <https://charter97.org/ru/news/2020/9/18/393672/> (Accessed: 7 July 2024).

²² 'Repentant videos' are shot by the police showing the arrested persons who are forced to confess to their crimes and to repent. This is often done with the use of physical violence and torture. The videos are then publicly disseminated and used as propaganda. See, Zaborona (2021) How the Belarusian authorities use homophobia for repression, available at: <https://zaborona.com/ru/kak-belaruskie-vlasti-ispolzuyut-gomofobiyu-dlya-repressij/> (Accessed: 10 July 2023).

change at the moment. She added that though previously they could influence men's organisations to some extent by filing complaints, such possibilities no longer exist.

4. 'Extreme anonymity' was discussed as a resistance and survival mechanism, and isolation as an effect of hostilities

Participants reported feeling isolated, powerless and unprotected when faced with anti-queer hostilities in Belarus. Financial difficulties and the need for extreme anonymity exacerbate this isolation.

Most participants spoke about prioritising the need to preserve anonymity, particularly following 2020, which has caused many to feel isolated and disconnected from the queer community. BLRINT07 said that prior to 2020 she participated in collectives, which used to provide space for reflection and healing. However, 2020 was a turning point when authorities began seeing such collectives as a threat, leading to their—both forced and voluntary—disintegration and causing many people to leave the country. The interviewee expressed fear of joining any offline group as of 2020, and added that these groups used to be a huge source of mental health support. Instead, she sought individual therapy as a protection strategy, avoiding situations that could endanger her. Despite this, she added, individual therapy does not compensate for the loss of collective support, leading to feelings of extreme isolation.

Participants said that they feel physically isolated and individualised in their experiences, given the inability to safely join support groups and communities, making it nearly impossible to care for one another. BLRINT03 said they feel the community's capacity for mutual care is very low due to the **trauma** from the events of 2020 and their aftermath. Many participants said that they have to rely on external networks (often abroad, but also online) to regain strength.

The possibility of physical gatherings for queer people in Belarus remains unclear. Those who organised events around 2020 shared that these events required balancing high-security measures against risks. By 2021, event locations were kept secret, and security was increased. 'Anti-gender' campaigners, including state and non-state actors, created fake profiles to pass security checks and discover event locations. Participants told us that they had to be constantly on high alert to keep the events safe for participants. BLRINT07 said that, prior to their decision to leave Belarus, only small gatherings of activists were possible to discuss ongoing issues and strategise.

Participants spoke about additional challenges they face as community leaders, where they have to bear the responsibility for the people they gather. BLRINT03 discussed the challenge of informing community members about the risks associated with organising events and meetings. Many community members are unaware of the surveillance, state threats, and potential dangers from various actors. The participant finds it difficult to balance truth-telling with the risk of increasing anxiety among members. The events of 2020, when many people were detained and arrested, exacerbated these concerns. The interviewee often struggles with how to inform people about potential KGB presence at events or the risk of data leaks to propaganda channels. The constant need to weigh high security measures against risks was described as exhausting.

The constant tension participants experience, the fear of surveillance, and potential threats have become exhausting. Some said that they feel paralysed by the precautions necessary to hold events. Resilience for many participants is in their ability to leave the country thereby physically distancing themselves from the tension for some time, while continuing activist work.

5. Participants described a variety of gender hostilities (including torture and imprisonment) they have experienced

Participants described a variety of gender hostilities, affecting women, LGBTIQ+ individuals, and their allies, perpetuated through media and legal intimidation.

Participants detailed diverse gender hostilities experienced in Belarus, emphasising how both state leaders and media incite discrimination and oppression. This incitement has led to increased violence against queer people and a negative societal perception. BLRINT02 said, “it is almost like giving a green light to societal aggression”. **Media hostility was a frequently referenced topic.** BLRINT02 said that as a woman she was furious, and tired, of being bombarded all her life with the messages that reproduction is women's primary role. The prevalence of unmoderated sexist, homophobic and transphobic speech on the national television and radio was mentioned by most participants. One participant, BLRINT02 spoke about being invited to a national radio station in the capacity of an expert, where she faced discriminatory comments with no moderation from hosts. She recounted being insulted on air despite presenting a well-researched commentary on a sexist advertisement, highlighting the lack of protection from hate speech in state and social media. She said she was “struck to the core” and shocked that the station broadcast this stream of hate and insults without any moderation.

Participants find that defending queer communities endangers the defenders/allies. BLRFG1.4/INT05 described a situation where their organisation was involved in a minor court case (unrelated to gender issues). During a court procedure a men's movement group intruded and accused their organisation of supporting queer communities and feminism. The participant said that it was presented as if defending queer people' rights was something bad, resulting in members of the organisation having to justify themselves for helping and fighting for the rights of queer people or women, which, in her words, was not only “challenging” but also “demoralising”.

Participants spoke about the risks that human rights defenders, lawyers, and NGO workers face in defending abortion/LGBTIQ+ rights²³, encountering accusations of spreading propaganda and loosely defined 'extremist' activities. BLRFG1.4/INT05 shared that her career in women's rights advocacy ended abruptly after being publicly accused of spreading propaganda, relating to a short educational video that their organisation produced about queer rights. This accusation, featured on national television, overshadowed years of work. She said in her experience such accusations in general instil fear in potential allies, deterring them from engaging in similar advocacy.

Participants who had experienced detention and imprisonment for peaceful protests shared harrowing accounts of human rights abuses and gender-based violence. BLRINT01 recounted her detention following participation in a peaceful protest, experiencing inhumane treatment and gendered intimidation during arrests, pre-trial detention, and imprisonment. She refused to confess to 'extremist activities' and faced constant pressure. Pre-verdict, she endured torture, such as confinement in overcrowded, smoke-filled rooms with poor sanitation, enforced (prolonged) sitting on hard surfaces, and punitive video surveillance.

Post-verdict, she was subjected to psychological and physical violence in prison, forced to work in unsafe conditions at a sewing factory with high disease transmission risks. Needles used for sewing were not sterilised, and basic hygiene was nearly impossible with limited access to sinks, toilets, and showers. Medical care was denied, and she was forced to work despite illness, leading to physical and psychological trauma.

6. Coordinated cyber smear campaigns target queer and feminist activists

Participants told us that there was a rise in organised 'anti-gender' hostility. Many spoke about the rise in coordinated cyber attacks against LGBTIQ+ and feminist activists in Belarus, highlighting the organised nature of such attacks and its severe emotional impact.

²³ Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, “Belarus: UN experts decry threats against women human rights defenders,” OHCHR, 2 November 2020. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=26470&LangID=E>

Most participants noticed the increase in hate speech and online smear campaigns against queer individuals and activists in Belarus. Many also remarked on the organised nature of 'anti-gender' attacks. Participants noted that these cyber attacks are not random acts of hate but coordinated efforts by specific, likely financially supported, groups. Those who have suffered from the targeting and smear campaigns observed that the amount of time put into researching, profiling and exposing individuals and their private information is significant, suggesting that it is unlikely to have been perpetrated by a single random individual, but rather entire groups/campaigns. Participants suggested that these groups conduct personal profiling of activists, posting detailed information and pictures on social media platforms like Telegram and Twitter.

Another participant shared how negative media coverage of gender and sexuality related issues affects the work of her collective, engaged in providing sex education at schools. BLRINT03 said that, prior to 2020, sex education at schools was still "somewhat possible", however difficult. There was a period when, on their Instagram pages, both personal and professional, more and more comments appeared, accusing them of aiming to destroy traditional values and calling for policies to stop pro-gender equality developments. As a result, teachers who previously collaborated with their organisation started refusing out of fear of punishment.

One participant, BLRINT03, shared that they have been very visible in public life in Belarus as a feminist and queer activist. They have cooperated with Belarusian independent media to write articles, reports, and provide expertise on feminist and LGBTIQ+ rights. Starting activism young, they have increasingly faced **violence**, both physical and digital, with more visibility. The more they appeared on social media and in the media, the more they encountered violence online. Sometime around 2020 they were subjected to intense smear campaigns on social media, with their personal data exposed, and were stalked and threatened in Minsk by far-right groups for almost a month. They recalled receiving death threats and threats of sexualized violence on social media, silencing them and making them feel there was no safe space to express themselves. The fear kept them from leaving their apartment, and they had to shut down some of their social media for a period of time. Other participants spoke about the existence of specific Telegram channels frequently posting content on reproductive rights, LGBTIQ+ rights, and the enemies of the union state (Russia-Belarus), targeting individuals and exposing their personal information, sometimes leading to prosecution. These systematic campaigns, the interviewee emphasised, suggest organised efforts rather than individual actions.

Participants who manage online accounts dedicated to educational/gender related topics, are also confronted with online hate constantly. They spoke of resistance strategies that they use to navigate and deal with hate. For example, BLRINT04 shared their experience of moderating a TikTok account with queer and feminist content. They constantly confront hostile verbal attacks and have developed strategies to deal with online hostility. In terms of resistance, they mentioned one of their "favourite" techniques is responding seriously to mocking comments. However, personal insults and threats are monitored and immediately deleted, especially if they target/affect other readers.

7. Migration was discussed as an effect of hostilities, but also as a resistance strategy and a way of surviving

Most participants of our study left Belarus after 2020 due to their experiences of being arrested and/or the fear of this linked to their activism. Participants spoke about migration as an effect of gender hostilities and a way of surviving, not just an 'escape'. Abroad, new forms of marginalisation have emerged, such as financial struggles, migrant status, and the loss of pre-existing networks.

Participants discussed how leaving the country was a difficult choice for many, involving separation from family and ongoing worry—those who left continue to worry about the safety of their families. However, for many it was a necessity for survival and was discussed as a form of resistance. BLRINT01 spoke about how,

having served her sentence following participation in the protests, she returned home to continued control and surveillance, receiving frequent calls and unannounced visits from law enforcement. She feared taking showers or baths alone, anticipating police raids. The constant tension, pressure, and intimidation led her to believe it was time to leave, as more protestors were being detained. Similarly, many other participants spoke about the fear of being detained. The fear intensified as more and more civil society organisations were closed down and activists arrested. Many participants recalled how their travel was a difficult experience. BLRINT01 explained how the situation was further aggravated with the COVID-19 pandemic, which cut Belarus off from European shelter programs for human rights defenders due to non-recognised vaccines²⁴ and flight restrictions. Ukraine and Georgia were among the few accessible relocation options that many participants took.

Several participants who relocated to Ukraine after 2020 faced difficulties conducting activist work for Belarus in Ukraine. Some participants shared how Belarusian and Ukrainian nationalist groups attempted to intimidate and frighten them within Ukraine, and financial struggles—many did not have much savings prior to relocating—further negatively shaped their experiences. However, existing connections with regional activists proved fruitful. Many relied on pre-existing connections in Ukraine and Georgia. This allowed some participants to continue their work remotely. Conversely, starting from scratch in Poland highlighted the challenges of building new networks. The war with Russia forced many to relocate again.

Participants recalled various gender hostilities, which persisted during different stages of immigration. For example, when crossing the border to Poland several participants recalled encountering anti-choice protesters and posters. BLRFG1.4/INT05 said that seeing anti-abortion activists and posters exacerbated the stress of fleeing.

Some participants who arrived in smaller European towns noted the presence of gender hostilities that were also there. For example, BLRINT04 found that her less conventional appearance caused difficulties both in Belarus and Europe. This therefore challenged their hopes and beliefs of Europe being a safe haven for gender equality and diversity.

Participants highlighted that immigration offered new possibilities, such as openly living their sexual and gender identities and filing legal complaints with confidence, particularly in Poland and Western European countries. However, it also exposed participants to additional vulnerabilities, including a lack of passport or citizenship rights that meant stark differences in legal status and rights.

Many participants did not have pre-existing networks in Europe and had to start building connections from scratch. Some participants said they felt **more discriminated against in Europe due to their nationality rather than sexual orientation** or gender identity. They found that many Europeans view Belarusians as part of the aggressor country, Russia. This made their experiences in the EU difficult and challenged imaginings of a 'free' Europe.

8. Strategies for queer and feminist activists in Belarus included establishing connections, continuing work abroad and caring for themselves and each other

Immigration, continued activism abroad, self-care, and mutual support have emerged as key strategies in the resistance of Belarusian queer feminist activists. Establishing connections with activists from regions with similar political contexts, such as Central Asia and the Western Balkans, is seen as vital for strengthening their efforts and fostering broader solidarity.

²⁴ During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian Sputnik V vaccine was not recognised by the European Medicines Agency (EMA), the regulatory body responsible for approving vaccines for use in the European Union. This lack of recognition meant that travellers from countries using Sputnik V, including Belarus, could not meet the vaccination requirements for entry into many European countries, limiting their mobility.

Migration, while forced by state oppression, is also a strategic form of resistance. Following the 2020 mass protests against the Lukashenka regime, many activists fled to countries like Poland, Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine to escape persecution. Although relocation offers a degree of freedom, allowing activists to live openly and engage in advocacy, it comes with challenges, including financial difficulties—due to the forced nature of migration for many, there were no secure jobs and often no means of making a living—nationality-based discrimination, housing challenges, language barriers, separation from and ongoing concerns about the safety of friends and families, and the loss of established networks, loneliness and inability to return home due to the fear of repression. Despite these hardships, emigration remains one of the few effective strategies for protection against ‘anti-gender’ hostilities in Belarus. Although the challenges of being forced to leave were significant, many participants value the relief from the constant threats to their life and freedom they have faced in Belarus. Many spoke about the feeling of relative safety, and ability to rely on a “functioning legal system” as positive aspects of immigration.

Once abroad, resistance continues. The growing Belarusian queer feminist network has become crucial for resistance. Even from abroad, the network of queer feminist activists continues to organise protests, both physically and online, to demand justice for political prisoners and an end to state violence in Belarus.

Given current limitations with regard to political action, that is, the inability to protest in Belarus or engage in discussions opposing oppressive legislation, such as the impending anti-LGBT propaganda law, changing public perception through online media, such as YouTube and podcasts, is seen as an effective strategy. Many activists facilitate educational projects that focus on feminism, LGBTIQ+ rights, and activism. They publish articles, create digital content, and collaborate with international partners to share Belarusian queer and feminist perspectives with global audiences. Cultural events such as film screenings, art exhibitions, and poetry readings also play a key role in preserving and promoting their identity and cause.

Many participants emphasised the importance of helping others—those still in Belarus and fellow emigrants, often volunteering their time and efforts. These efforts vary based on participants’ capabilities. Some help financially, others offer childcare, still others help with arranging required documents in the process of immigration. Many people we spoke with spend hours and hours per day on a volunteer basis, helping others document abuses and file complaints. “I’m safe, I’m recovering, I’ve started to sleep peacefully at night,” said BLRNT04, a lawyer and human rights defender, who spends her nights studying difficult cases and giving people legal advice. She stressed that legal knowledge is a powerful resistance tool. As a lawyer and former political prisoner, she has used her understanding of human rights law to document violations and attract international attention to her case, and now she is helping others.

Mental health support was also named as a crucial element of resistance, especially for those suffering from psychological trauma post-2020. Participants stressed the need for mental health resources, though securing funding for such initiatives remains difficult. Self-care was named as yet another strategy: BLRINT03, who currently still lives in Belarus, spoke about switching to freelance work, and choosing private medical providers as some ways to feel somewhat distanced and protected.

Through these activities, the Belarusian queer feminist network continues its fight for equality and justice, striving to maintain international pressure on the Belarusian regime while supporting the LGBTIQ+ and feminist communities in exile. Several participants voiced their wish to expand this growing network internationally, particularly with regions sharing similar histories. It was suggested that establishing connections with activists in Central Asia, the Western Balkans, and beyond can provide practical support, solidarity and advocacy efforts. BLRINT03 said that current networking projects mostly involve Belarus-Poland and Belarus-Lithuania due to significant Belarusian migration to these countries; however, expanding alliances with regions previously excluded from collaboration is seen by many participants as essential for broader solidarity.

Conclusion

We are tremendously grateful to all the participants who have shared their experiences in this study. The testimonies of Belarusian queer and feminist activists reveal three key aspects of their experiences and resistance efforts.

Participants reported diverse 'anti-gender' hostilities: LGBTIQ+ individuals in Belarus suffer from systemic discrimination and violence, exacerbated by state-sanctioned repression. Discriminatory legislation, like the impending anti-LGBTIQ propaganda law, fosters societal stigma and emboldens acts of physical and digital violence against the community. The state's hostile narratives, reinforced by both official media and organised online harassment, increase the marginalisation of LGBTIQ+ individuals. This has led to widespread fear, with activists facing severe limitations in their capacity to report abuses and advocate for equal rights.

Many have been forced into exile, where they continue to resist these repressive measures from abroad.²⁵ For many activists, migration is both a necessity and a form of resistance. Following the mass protests of 2020, heightened repression, mass arrests, and gender-specific reprisals have driven activists to flee Belarus, particularly to countries like Poland, Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine. Although emigration is forced by circumstances, it also offers a way to not only escape persecution but also to continue the fight for gender equality. While relocation allows for greater personal freedom and safety, it comes with challenges such as lack of jobs and financial cushions, discrimination based on nationality, legalisation difficulties, separation from families and the loss of established (familiar) networks among others.

Participants spoke about continuing ongoing resistance abroad: Even in exile, Belarusian queer and feminist activists continue their resistance. The formation and expansion of the Belarusian queer feminist network have been crucial in sustaining this resistance. Through mutual care, solidarity, and practical support, activists help others rebuild their lives, advocate for LGBTIQ+ and women's rights, and raise awareness about the repression in Belarus. The network also plays a vital role in organising protests, participating in global feminist movements, and creating educational content to challenge stereotypes. These ongoing efforts not only maintain international pressure on the Belarusian regime but also foster a sense of community and resilience among displaced activists.

²⁵ The recent report highlights how the Belarusian government has systematically purged independent civil society organisations, forcing many to relocate abroad or operate underground.

Marin, A. (2024). *Situation of human rights in Belarus: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Belarus*. Human Rights Council. Available at:

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5665-situation-human-rights-belarus-report-special-rapporteur>

The report also highlights the arbitrary arrests and detentions of activists following the 2020 presidential elections, with tens of thousands of people being detained on political grounds. Many detainees face inhumane treatment, including solitary confinement, denial of medical care, and prolonged detention without access to legal representation.

Respondent Profiles

We asked the 18 participants to fill out a voluntary demographic form with open text boxes for each variable. 4 participants filled their voluntary demographic forms while 14 others were asked the questions directly during the interviews.

Table 1: Respondent profiles Belarus

| Profile | No. of Responses | Sample Outline |
|--|------------------|---|
| Age groups | 18 | Most participants who indicated their age are between 25 and 34 (8 participants) or 35 and 49 years old (6), three were in the 50-64 range, we had no participants older than 65 and younger than 24. |
| Gender | 18 | The sample includes predominantly cis women (14). Three participants identified as non-binary and one as a cis man. |
| Sexual orientation / identity | 18 | Six identified as heterosexual, five identified as lesbian, two as pan-sexual, two identified as queer, one identified as gay, two did not define. |
| Country of origin | 18 | Belarus was named as a country of origin for all 18 participants in this sample. |
| Country of residence / legal status | 18 | At the time of the study, most participants (16/18) were residing outside of Belarus, with only two participants currently living in Belarus. 11 reside in Poland, two in Germany, one in Georgia, one in Switzerland, one in Sweden. |
| Racial / ethnic identity | 18 | In terms of ethnicity, most participants identified as Belarusian (11/18), with one identifying as Belarusian and Russian, one as white-passing with Roma roots, one participant identified as Slavic, four did not answer. |
| National identity | 18 | 11 out of 18 participants named their national identity, and all identified as Balrusians. |
| Educational training | 18 | Most participants in this sample have higher education (11/18), 3/18 with professional training, four didn't specify. |
| Religion | 18 | Seven participants identified as Orthodox, one participant identified as atheist, the rest of the participants (10/18) did not name their religious affiliations. |

| | | |
|---------------------------------------|----|---|
| Social class | 18 | One identified as upper middle class, one as lower middle class, all other participants said they could not define their class. |
| Dis/ability / chronic diseases | 18 | Two participants reported living with a disability. |
| Settlement type | 18 | Most participants (10/18) said they came from big town, three from medium size town, one from small town, four didn' say. |
| Anything else | 18 | Two people mentioned struggling with mental health issues. Four women emphasised how being a mother shaped their experiences. |