

FROM NEEDS ASSESSMENT TO ACTION

Building Resilience through a Local Democracy Agency Belarus in Exile

A Policy Brief based on multi-stakeholder consultations in
Poland and Lithuania (2025–2026)



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Foundation**

From Needs Assessment to Action: Building Resilience through a Local Democracy Agency Belarus in Exile

The project “Towards a Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Belarus in Exile” is co-funded by the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF) and implemented by ALDA – the European Association of Local Democracy. Running from September 2025 through March 2026, the project organised a series of multi-stakeholder meetings in Wrocław, Vilnius, and Kraków. These consultations culminated in Warsaw at the Strategic Foresight Conference for Belarus co-organised by the Beehive Consortium in March 2026. The project’s primary objectives were to assess the needs of Belarusian communities residing in Poland and Lithuania, gather feedback on ALDA’s proposed model for establishing the LDA Belarus in Exile, and develop recommendations to strengthen Belarusian engagement in local democratic life. Key recommendations include streamlining residency frameworks for displaced skilled Belarusians to improve access to essential services, fostering joint capacity-building between Belarusian NGOs and municipal authorities to deliver tailored integration support, and promoting avenues for meaningful participation in local governance. The project aimed to build a durable bridge between Belarusian civic actors in exile and their host societies, ensuring that democratic and citizen participation efforts could continue to thrive until they can be fully realised within Belarus itself.

1. Introduction: From Temporary Displacement to Long-Term Residency

Following the fraudulent 2020 presidential elections and the subsequent brutal crackdown on civil society by the Lukashenko regime, Belarus has undergone a profound migratory shift. What was initially perceived as a temporary wave of displacement has solidified into a structural phenomenon of “exile.” Estimates from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe suggest that between **200,000 and 500,000 Belarusians** have fled the country, with Poland and Lithuania acting as the primary destinations. Between 2020 and 2022 alone, EU countries issued over 500,000 first residence permits to Belarusians, of which Poland accounted for roughly 95 %.¹

Given the continued political deadlock in Minsk and the growing Russian influence over Belarus, these individuals are no longer “temporary guests” but long-term residents.² This reality calls for a shift from **humanitarian emergency response** to a long-term **strategic integration**

¹International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD), “Belarus’ Migration Trends and Their Implications for the EU,” Policy Brief, 2024.

² Richard Myers, “The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles: Integrating the Belarusian Diaspora in Poland and Lithuania,” *German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF)*, January 15, 2025.

framework.³ Treating the Belarusian diaspora as temporary prevents the host countries from fully realising its social and economic potential, particularly in high-value sectors like IT and innovation.

2. The Strategic Imperative for Host Countries

For host municipalities in Poland and Lithuania, developing a proactive strategy to engage the exiled Belarusian community is not merely a humanitarian gesture, but also an investment in local prosperity and regional security.⁴

- **Social Cohesion vs. “The Bubble” Effect:** Without deliberate integration measures, exiled communities risk remaining in social “bubbles,” increasing the likelihood of alienation.⁵
- **Countering Hybrid Warfare:** The Lukashenko regime has exploited migration as a form of “hybrid warfare” to undermine EU unity.⁶ Integrating the democratic Belarusian diaspora sends a clear counter-message, highlighting the strength and resilience of democratic values.⁷
- **Economic Contribution:** Highly skilled Belarusians represent a valuable workforce. Supporting their full labour-market integration - through diploma recognition and entrepreneurship programmes - addresses critical workforce gaps in the EU and preserves Belarus’ human capital productively engaged until a political transition makes return possible.
- **Local Democracy:** Encouraging participation in local life ensures they are not passive aid recipients, but active contributors to the democratic life of their host communities.

³ Council of Europe: Parliamentary Assembly (PACE), “Addressing the Specific Challenges Faced by Belarusians in Exile,” Resolution 2499 (2023), adopted June 20, 2023.

⁴ Myers, “The Strategic Potential of Democratic Exiles.”

⁵ Kraków Municipal Office, “The ‘Open Kraków’ Programme: An Inclusive Strategy for Foreigners,” *Kraków.pl*, 2024.

⁶ ICMPD, “Belarus’ Migration Trends.”

⁷ ALDA, “Building Bridges for Democratic Engagement: ALDA and Wrocław Municipality Host Dialogue,” *ALDA News*, October 6, 2025.

3. Needs Assessment: Findings from meetings in Wrocław, Vilnius, and Kraków under the Project – Towards a Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Belarus in Exile.

Project meetings in **Wrocław, Vilnius, and Kraków** (October - November 2025) highlighted opportunities to strengthen municipal programmes in addressing the needs of the Belarusian communities.⁸

Administrative and Economic Barriers

- **Short-Term Permit Limitations:** In Kraków, residents noted that Polish banks often deny loans or services to Belarusians holding one-year residence permits, creating barriers to financial security.
- **Visa Uncertainty:** Sudden changes in enrollment rules affecting over 500 Belarusian students in Poland highlight the need for more predictable legal pathways.⁹
- **Qualification Recognition:** In Vilnius, challenges with translating and validating diplomas from Belarus continue to prevent skilled Belarusian workers from practicing their professions.

Cultural and Psychological Needs

- **Preserving Cultural Identity in Exile:** There is a strong need for safe spaces to preserve the Belarusian language and provide identity education for children. Belarusian publishers in exile struggle to reach audiences, risking the erosion of a cultural heritage that the Lukashenko regime is actively suppressing at home.
- **Emotional Well-Being:** After five years in exile, the community is facing “emotional fatigue” and “psychological struggle.” In Vilnius, participants noted a rise in divorces and growing community fragmentation due to prolonged instability and uncertainty about their future.

⁸ ALDA, “The Launch of LDA Belarus in Exile: Empowering Belarusian Civic Engagement in Europe,” *ALDA News*, October 30, 2025.

⁹ Meeting with Belarusian community representatives in Krakow, ALDA, November 2025.

Communication and Advocacy

- **Information Gaps:** While municipalities such as Kraków offer programmes like **Open Kraków (Otwarty Kraków)**, many non-Polish residents, including Belarusians, are often unaware of how to access these services covering legal and administrative guidance, labour market information, education, healthcare, and professional consultations, or how to receive support for discrimination cases. Better communication, including multilingual outreach, and targeted advocacy are therefore essential to ensure these services reach diverse migrant communities.
- **Need for Coordinated Support:** There is currently no “one-stop-shop” or dedicated resource centre where individuals or small NGOs can receive clear guidance on living and operating in Lithuania or Poland or other host countries.

4. The Proposed Solution: Establishing a Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Belarus in Exile

The Local Democracy Agency (LDA) model, pioneered by **ALDA** in 1993, is well-suited to address these challenges.¹⁰ Originally created by the Council of Europe to promote peace and local democracy in the post-conflict Balkans, the 18 existing LDAs serve as platforms for cooperation between local authorities and civil society. Building on proven model, **establishing the LDA Belarus in Exile** would complement existing Belarusian initiatives by coordinating available resources, promoting active participation of Belarusians in local life within host countries, and ensuring that Belarusian needs remain visible on the EU policy agenda.

Why an LDA Belarus in Exile?

1. **Bridging the Gap:** The LDA would act as the missing link between the exiled Belarusian civil society and host municipalities. It would translate municipal policies into actionable information for the community members.
2. **A Framework for Advocacy:** An LDA provides a formal, internationalised framework to advocate for Belarusian rights at the local and EU levels, ensuring that exiled communities have a voice and are included in migration-focused thematic discussions.

¹⁰ ALDA, “30 Years of Local Democracy,” accessed March 10, 2026.

3. **Resource Coordination:** Following the feedback gathered in Vilnius, the LDA could act as a **Resource hub**, providing legal advice, language training options, and civic education on how to participate more proactively in European democratic life.
4. **Preserving Identity without Isolation:** By organising cultural diplomacy and history forums (as requested at the Kraków meeting), the LDA ensures that Belarusians integrate into Polish/Lithuanian society without losing their unique cultural agenda.
5. **Preparing Future Democratic Leadership:** The LDA would play a crucial role in human capital preservation, ensuring that the intellectual and civic potential of the exiled community members is not lost to displacement. By providing targeted leadership development and direct exposure to European municipal practices, the Agency equips an emerging generation of Belarusian leaders with the technical skills and democratic values required to implement systemic reforms in a post-authoritarian Belarus.

Recommendations Based on the Project Findings:

Streamline Residency for Skilled Workers: Municipalities should coordinate with national authorities to recognise the involuntary nature of their displacements by differentiating the status of “exiles” from general “economic migrants,” and extending residence permits to facilitate access to banking, housing, and other essential services.

Joint Capacity-building: Implement programmes through which Belarusian NGOs and host-country municipal officials co-design integration services. This approach fosters trust and ensures that services such as legal aid and psychological support are culturally and linguistically tailored.

Support Local Political Participation: Encourage initiatives that prepare Belarusians for meaningful engagement in local governance, including community decision-making and, where legally permitted, local voting rights, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and integration within host communities.

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European Association
for Local Democracy

This policy brief highlights the urgent need to move from short-term responses to long-term integration strategies for Belarusian communities in exile. Establishing a Local Democracy Agency (LDA) Belarus in Exile represents a concrete and scalable solution to strengthen democratic participation, support social cohesion, and enhance cooperation between civil society and local authorities across Europe.

This document reflects the views of the authors and does not necessarily represent the official position of the German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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