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Years of Healing: Civil Society's Role in Resettlement Belarusian Former Female Political Prisoners

CEERES Master's Thesis

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Natalia Kondrashova, 31.01.2025

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Abstract

This Master's thesis is based on interviews with representatives of Belarusian civil society residing in the EU. It aims to enhance understanding of the resettlement of former female political prisoners after their release. The thesis explores resettlement questions from a gendered perspective, focusing on women who faced challenges different from men's and how civil society addresses these issues.

Keywords: female political prisoners, former political prisoners, resocialization of political prisoners, Belarusian civil society, resettlement of political prisoners.

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1. Introduction

When the Belarusian Central Election Commission announced the results of the presidential election on the warm evening of August 9, 2020, many people across the country took to the streets in protest against the results. According to the official figures¹, Alyaksandr Lukashenka received 80 percent of the vote, while his main opponent, independent candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, garnered only 10 percent. This outcome allowed Lukashenka to remain in power at least until 2030, extending his rule over Belarus to 36 years. However, independent organizations claim² that Tikhanovskaya actually won the presidential election.

On the first night of protests, Belarusians who gathered peacefully in Minsk, Homel, Hrodna, Mahiliou, and other cities faced unprecedented brutality from law enforcement agencies. Protesters were brutally beaten with batons, leaving them with severe bruises, and shot with rubber bullets, resulting in many losing limbs. Water cannons were deployed to disperse the crowds. Participants were detained by Belarusian police and OMON, and many were subjected to horrific torture in detention centers. Tragically, eight people lost their lives due to the actions of law enforcement during the protests.

Mass protests against Lukashenka and his regime continued actively until the winter of 2020-2021. Since that time, protests have seemed impossible due to the brutal punishments imposed on those who take part in them. All in all, thousands of people became political prisoners. Individuals were detained not only for participating in protests but also for covering rallies, commenting on social media, and assisting other political prisoners, among other charges.

One of the defining features of the 2020s protests in Belarus, compared to earlier opposition activities in the country, is that they “became the first case when state violence, previously focused almost exclusively on men, was extended and adapted against politically engaged women” (Chulitskaya and Matonyte, 2024:1). That caught my attention as a researcher and as a female.

When I decided to research political imprisonment for my thesis, I realized that the topic is extensive. Despite this, relatively few scholars have explored political prisoners from a gender perspective, even though it is essential for a more comprehensive understanding for several reasons.

First of all, female prisoners have specific needs, as outlined in the UN Rules for the Treatment of Women Prisoners and Non-custodial Measures for Women Offenders (the Bangkok Rules; Resolution A/RES/65/229), adopted by the UN General Assembly in

¹ Central Election Commission of the Republic of Belarus, https://rec.gov.by/files/2020/gol_itog.pdf, consulted on 10.9.24.

² Kostenko, V. (2021). ‘In Belarus, it was proven that Tikhanovskaya won the presidential election with 3 million votes’, <https://www.dsnews.ua/world/u-bilorusi-doveli-shcho-tihanovska-peremogla-na-viborah-prezidenta-z-3-mln-gol-osiv-18072021-431485>, consulted on 10.9.24.

December 2010³. The UN highlights⁴ that prison architecture, security procedures, medical facilities, family visits, and educational opportunities are typically designed for men. This means that the unique needs and interests of women prisoners are often overlooked.

Secondly, as Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) point out, when the state directs violence at women, political repression becomes a manifestation of men's privileged position in society and an extension of patriarchal power and control. Elshtain (2020) highlights that political violence against women aims to silence them, push them into the private sphere, and strip them of their political agency. The repressive state employs various mechanisms to reinforce this unequal treatment, including physical, sexualized, and psychological violence, as well as economic restrictions (Biroli 2016). These forms of political violence, together with general economic inequality⁵, affect their careers, personal well-being, and family life and put their health and life in general at risk.

Thirdly, the families of imprisoned women (including for political reasons) face many more difficulties than the families where a man is detained.⁶ Children of detained women are probably raised by other family members without comprehensive parental care, live in a prison, or are more likely to be placed in orphanages.⁷ Furthermore, women face a higher risk of being subjected to sexualized torture and are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety, and other types of disorders, particularly PTSD, than men (Halvorsen and Kagee, 2010; Spiric et al., 2010). In addition, female prisoners have special needs related to their physiology. They require hygiene items every month to deal with menstruation, which can be used as torture, including as applied to political prisoners for the sake of pressure (Wahidin 2019). Moreover, Prokić (2016) describes how the administration of *Goli Otok* prison in former Yugoslavia deliberately used violent methods aimed at harming women's ability to bear children and their physical appearance.

Willis, Chou, and Hunt (2015), in a systematic review of the effects of political imprisonment on mental health based on eight studies, concluded that common symptoms experienced by ex-political prisoners include PTSD, depression, and anxiety. These symptoms persisted after release due to a lack of resocialization, employment or educational opportunities, social support, and, in general, social isolation. This is why it is crucial to research the effects of political imprisonment, with a particular focus on women who have distinct needs that require special attention.

³United Nations website, 'Rules of the United Nations concerning the treatment of women prisoners and non-custodial measures for women offenders (Bangkok Rules) – Conventions and Agreements – Declarations, Conventions, Agreements and Other Legal Materials', https://www.un.org/ru/documents/decl_conv/conventions/bangkok_rules.shtml, consulted on 10.9.24.

⁴United Nations website, 'Concerning the treatment of women prisoners and women offenders. A brief guide', <https://cdn.penalreform.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Final-PRI-Short-Guide-Bangkok-Rules-Russian.pdf>, consulted on 10.9.24.

⁵ World Economic Forum website, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2023', https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf, consulted on 10.9.24.

⁶ Jiménez Sandoval, C. (2023). 'Women Political Prisoners in Latin America, a Reality that can be Changed', <https://www.wola.org/analysis/women-political-prisoners-latin-america-reality-changed/>, consulted on 10.9.24.

⁷ Ibid.

As I delved deeper into this topic, I discovered that the impact of political imprisonment on a woman's resettlement into society has not been widely studied, particularly in terms of employment (or the ability to work), cultural factors (such as the language of communication), and social aspects (including relationships with friends, willingness to engage in political activities, hobbies, and interests).

Unable to directly research the experiences of Belarusian women who have been imprisoned for political reasons due to the many risks involved, I decided to focus on how civil society groups structure their work to assist with their resettlement. To reach my research goals, I had eight exploratory expert interviews. It is well known that non-profit organizations, voluntary associations, and volunteers show solidarity with political prisoners in various ways, such as writing letters, supporting their families, sending essential hygiene items or literature to prisons, and conducting information campaigns (Hackett 2015). However, I found little information on the mechanisms these groups use to facilitate the resettlement of former political prisoners, whether they account for the specific gender-related needs of women, as previously discussed, and what is their role as contributory experts.

In my thesis, I aim to address these gaps by exploring the following research questions:

1. How do experiences of political imprisonment uniquely impact women's resettlement into society? What variables affect these patterns?
2. How does the expertise of civil society members help political prisoners address post-release challenges? Do civil society representatives leverage their expertise to implement specific tools or resources in their work that are particularly beneficial for women?

2. Methodology

2.1 Case selection

I chose a single case study to address these gaps and achieve the research objectives. Belarus has been selected as a suitable case to expand the literature on women's political imprisonment circumstances. This choice is informed by the significant number of former female political prisoners in Belarus and the many initiatives focused on assisting political prisoners.

I argue that the Belarusian experience of resettlement of former political prisoners and the assistance provided by civil society offers valuable insights for studying other post-Soviet authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and Azerbaijan. Despite their unique characteristics, these regimes share certain cultural and political similarities. Moreover, Belarus serves as an example of how civil society actors can support political prisoners, including those who have

completed their sentences while operating in exile. This experience provides important lessons for civil society workers forced to flee authoritarian regimes like Iran.

Additionally, this study can lay the groundwork for comparative research with other countries or regions where the issue of political imprisonment is a focal point, including Northern Ireland and Palestine.

Through this thesis, I also aim to guide future researchers interested in exploring the gender dimension of imprisonment or political persecution. This dimension has potentially universal relevance for scholars investigating these topics in different contexts.

While I recognize that the findings of this research are limited by its relatively short timeline and variations in the resettlement practices of former female political prisoners across different states, regimes, and conflict dynamics, this study seeks to provide meaningful answers to the research questions posed.

2.2 Research Method

This thesis uses an interpretivist research paradigm to examine mechanisms of civil society that assist former female political prisoners. According to it, social reality is not singular or objective, and it is best studied within its social context.

The method employed in my research paper involves semi-structured expert interviews, commonly utilized in political analyses (Van Den Bulck et al., 2019). Döringer (2021) observes that this method has been extensively debated in political and social sciences since the 1990s, aiming to scrutinize data or data collection within a particular field. Meuser and Nagel (2009) elaborate that in this method, researchers rely on the specialized knowledge of experts in a given field. Semi-structured interviews were chosen to give me, as a researcher, the flexibility to modify questions or introduce new ones as needed. This approach allows the experts to reflect more deeply on their answers (Flick 2011).

The definition of an 'expert' lacks universal acceptance, leading to ongoing debates among social scientists regarding the criteria for categorizing individuals as experts and discerning what constitutes valuable expert knowledge (Gläser and Laudel, 2009). As Eyal (2019) points out it is a skill, an ability, or know-how that certain people, called 'experts' have, while others do not. Kaiser (2014) acknowledges that expertise can be identified not solely based on specific field knowledge but also by social position or status. Meuser and Nagel (1991) contend that an individual may be viewed as an expert if they are valuable in developing, emerging, or controlling a situation. This group of people may also maintain privileged access to a specific category of a population or decision-making process. Atkeson and Alvarez (2018) suggest that experts encompass a range of individuals, including academics, practitioners, political elites, managers, or anyone with specialized expertise or knowledge.

Bogner and Menz (2009) distinguish three types of expert interviews. The first, termed 'exploratory expert interviews,' is frequently employed to glean insights in unfamiliar or little-explored domains, aiding in generating initial hypotheses. The second type, 'systematizing expert interview', aims for a comprehensive and structured collection of expert knowledge to ensure high data comparability. The third, 'theory-generating expert interviews' according to Bogner and Menz (2009), contribute to three primary functions as outlined by Von Soest (2023): exploration of topics and hypothesis development, data collection for qualitative and mixed methods, and making statistical inferences.

Von Soest (2023) underscores several advantages of expert interviews in elucidating causal relationships. They complement experimental data, offering insights into processes and decision-making mechanisms (Fu and Simmons, 2021). Moreover, expert interviews prove valuable in disciplines where experimental or statistical analyses face constraints, particularly with limited observations (Von Soest, 2023).

Furthermore, Von Soest (2023) describes four different applications of expert knowledge. First, they can judge political and social events by analyzing them. Second, they can aggregate multifaceted phenomena by reconstructing events in a more descriptive form. Third, as the researcher notes, experts can use their experience or research to predict events or actor behavior. For example, experts may predict what type of regime will be established in a country after the death of an authoritarian leader who solely rules the state. Finally, experts can confirm or refute the results of previous research or different information.

Given the existing gaps in my topic, I believe that employing the expert interview method can help address these issues.

2.3. Participants

To achieve my research objectives, a total of eight in-depth, semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. These interviews, which lasted between 25 and 72 minutes, took place online via Zoom and were held between August 2024 and September 2024. Seven interviews were conducted in Russian, my native language. In one instance, the interviewee responded in Belarusian, the language I understand. Initially, the audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed in Microsoft Word using the automatic transcription function. Afterward, these transcriptions were proofread and edited.

I employed purposive sampling and snowball sampling. First, I compiled a list of potential participants based on online observation of media presence and engagement on Facebook. Following this, I asked participants to recommend other potential candidates from their networks who might be willing to participate and provide their contact information. The criteria used to select the initial respondents were as follows:

- Employment in a non-governmental organization (NGO), or a grassroots initiative, or in an association that supports Belarusian political prisoners and/or their families during their imprisonment or after their release,
- Permanent residence in European Union countries or, more broadly, in a Western country (e.g., the UK, the USA),
- No intention of visiting Belarus or Russia shortly, especially under the current political regimes.

I added the last condition because some of my interlocutors work in organizations that the Belarusian authorities have designated as 'extremist formations.' It means that, upon entering Belarus, they could face criminal prosecution if law enforcement agencies were aware of their workplace affiliations. Although the respondents' answers in this study are anonymous, and the participants have previously given open interviews about their work and the situation of Belarusian political prisoners, I wanted to minimize any possible risk to them. I also included Russia in this consideration, as Moscow and Minsk have an agreement allowing for the exchange of information about individuals crossing the border of either country⁸. Consequently, if my respondents travel to Russia, there is a probability that Belarusian security structures may become aware of their whereabouts.

I contacted the participants via Facebook, Telegram, or Signal, all of which provide encrypted communication. To ensure confidentiality and security, all responses were anonymized in this thesis. Before the interviews, participants were given the opportunity to review the List of Questions, a Privacy Note, and a Plain Language Statement in either Russian or English. All participants signed a Consent Form and were free to ask any questions about the research.

Seven participants were employees of NGOs, grassroots initiatives, or associations that support Belarusian political prisoners and/or their families, both during or after their imprisonment. One participant focused exclusively on female Belarusian political prisoners. The decision to concentrate on NGOs, grassroots initiatives and associations was made because these segments of civil society gather and produce a significant amount of data, much of which is underutilized in academic research (Masefield et al., 2020). Therefore, analyzing this data could provide valuable insights and contribute to the field of study. Additionally, this group of respondents allows me to mitigate several research limitations, which will be discussed more thoroughly later. Six interviews were conducted using video, while in one case, the interviewee declined to use video.

Initially, the list of potential participants included ten individuals whose professional experience was deemed relevant to this research. One interviewee, after initially agreeing to participate, withdrew during the Zoom call, citing contractual obligations to their partners that prohibited them from discussing assistance to Belarusian political prisoners. Another

⁸ Russian Business Consulting website, 'Russian Ministry of Digital Development, Communications and Mass Media proposed to exchange data on migrants with Belarus', https://www.rbc.ru/technology_and_media/09/07/2024/668d0f9c9a79474c72782d25?from=from_main_2, consulted on 21.1.25.

potential participant, recruited via snowball sampling and affiliated with an international organization, also declined to be interviewed due to internal policies preventing them from disclosing information about the organization's activities. However, this individual wished me luck with the thesis and expressed interest in reviewing the final results.

Additionally, I attempted to contact two more organizations that had been recommended by participants, and one more organization that I found doing my extensive desk research. Unfortunately, these organizations did not respond to my emails, and even a personal referral from a participant to one of the organizations yielded no response.

It should be noted that one interviewee provided their responses via voice messages on Telegram, having received the interview questions in a separate document prior to the interview. Nevertheless, their responses are not included in this study, as they requested their name be mentioned in the thesis, which would violate the safety protocols established in the research and approved by the university's ethics committee.

2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

For my study, I opted for semi-structured online interviews focused on specific topics with predetermined questions, as suggested by Tansey (2009). This format facilitates clarification of points, allows interviewer questioning, and adheres to established themes and questions. The questions posed to interviewees were open-ended, enabling them to provide comprehensive responses. As Van Den Bulck et al. (2019) observe, open-ended questions empower participants to elucidate, argue, and clarify, thereby enriching research. Such interviews also afford researchers greater flexibility. Open-ended semi-structured interviews are a good option for “exploring understandings, perceptions, and constructions of things that participants have some kind of personal stake in” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 81).

In this thesis, the thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) is used to analyze the interview data. Initial codes were generated by reading the interview transcripts. It was necessary to represent significant and recurring points raised by the participants during the research.

2.5. Limitations of the Study

The sampling methods used in this study—purposive sampling and snowball sampling—have their own limitations.

In snowball sampling, where each respondent is asked to recommend others to interview, there's a tendency for participants to suggest colleagues who share similar beliefs rather than those with opposing views. Some respondents mentioned conflicts with certain NGOs representatives or expressed doubts about the data those organizations publicly shared. Despite this, my interviewees could still provide the information I needed.

Another notable limitation is the sample size. The nine interviews conducted do not fully represent all organizations in the European Union and other Western European countries that support Belarusian women political prisoners after their release. As a result, the data collected may be incomplete.

Several factors explain this sample size. First, as a non-Belarusian, I may have been unaware of certain organizations or discovered them too late. Additionally, some potential participants declined to be interviewed, even anonymously, due to the topic's sensitivity. I also suspect that some individuals were either too busy or uninterested, as they did not respond to my emails or requests from my interviewees.

I acknowledge that some representatives of Belarusian civil society may have been hesitant to speak with me because I am Russian, both ethnically and by citizenship. They may have seen me as a stranger or as a researcher who, in their view, should focus on women political prisoners in Russia instead. Nevertheless, I believe it is crucial for me, both as a researcher and as a citizen, to understand the Belarusian experience of women's political imprisonment and the role of civil society in addressing its consequences, particularly considering the close cooperation between the security agencies of Russia and Belarus within the framework of the so-called 'union state.' As for the 24th October 2024, 2353 political prisoners in Russia are deprived of their liberty⁹. So far, they have not faced the same harsh measures as Belarusian political prisoners (though they still suffer greatly, enduring various forms of torture), but this could be expected given the close cooperation between the security agencies of the two countries. However, I also acknowledge that some aspects may be overlooked in my research, as I may still lack a full understanding of the context despite following the Belarusian information agenda.

It is also important to note that the data on the needs of women former political prisoners was not obtained directly from them but rather through NGOs or associations of the civil society representatives who work with them. I recognize that this may raise concerns about power dynamics, where the voices of the oppressed are mediated by those who have not personally endured long-term imprisonment for political activism. Initially, I intended to interview former Belarusian political prisoners; however, I recognized that this approach would be highly risky due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and by the ethical guidelines of the University of Glasgow. Additionally, Belarusian media has published numerous interviews with former political prisoners, including women, where they recount their experiences of imprisonment and emigration. Their stories, in this case, are both heard and visible.

Furthermore, I understand that my personal experiences and values as a researcher can influence data interpretation, coding, analysis, and the meanings extracted from the research. These factors may also affect how interviews are conducted, what questions are asked, and

⁹ Ovd.Info website. (2024). 'The database of politically motivated criminal prosecutions', https://ovd.info/politpressing_first_version, consulted on 24.10.24.

the overall tone of the conversation. I acknowledge that my personal views may influence the research outcomes. However, I believe that by being mindful of these biases, their potential impact can be mitigated.

Despite these limitations, I believe my research contributes to the existing knowledge of regional studies in Eastern Europe and women's experiences of political imprisonment. This study is particularly relevant in the context of a regime that continues to function despite opposition from the people, some of whom became political prisoners. I have made efforts to account for my biases in presenting the research findings.

Another point worth mentioning is the language barrier. Eight interviews were conducted in Russian, with responses provided in Russian. In one instance, I asked questions in Russian and received responses in Belarusian.

Russian is my native language, which facilitated clear communication with all respondents except for the English-speaking participants. The interviews were transcribed in Russian and subsequently analyzed. Summaries and descriptions were then presented in English in the thesis. I have been using English in my studies and daily life for the past three years and for the last nine years in my professional work, so I believe this is sufficient to avoid any distortion of meaning.

Although Belarusian is not my mother tongue, I have a good understanding of it, particularly on topics related to repression and political imprisonment. After my Master's thesis topic was approved, I began listening to interviews in Belarusian on YouTube to improve my comprehension, anticipating that some interviewees might speak Belarusian. Additionally, I studied Polish during my first two semesters at the University of Tartu and the University of Glasgow, which has helped strengthen my understanding of the Belarusian language, as some words and expressions are slightly similar.

Given these factors, the data presented in this paper cannot claim to be fully representative. Nonetheless, this work can contribute to expanding research networks on gender mainstreaming in NGOs work on the effects of political imprisonment on women and can generate new research questions.

2.6. Ethics

Before beginning my research, I submitted an application to the College Research Ethics Committee of the University of Glasgow's College of Social Sciences, seeking approval for the topic. The application detailed the project, research methods, and the measures I would take to ensure the safety of both the data and my interlocutors. My goal was to mitigate any potential ethical issues that could arise during the course of this research.

The primary challenge of this Master's dissertation lies in its extremely sensitive topic, which poses potential risks to the safety of both participants and myself as a researcher. To reduce

these risks and protect the psychological well-being of respondents, I ensured anonymity throughout the research. Additionally, the organizations and initiatives my interviewees represent are also anonymized to enhance safety. While those familiar with Belarusian civil society may recognize certain organizations, all respondents operate openly daily. They are accustomed to giving interviews and sharing the results of their work on social media, so my interview was unlikely to impose significant psychological stress.

Furthermore, as outlined earlier, I selected participants who reside permanently in the EU or the broader Western world and have no plans to visit Russia or Belarus shortly, particularly given the current political regimes. My last visit to Russia and Belarus was in 2021, and I do not intend to return to these countries anytime soon. As a result, the risk of being targeted by the Belarusian government for discussing my research or covering the topic of political imprisonment is relatively low.

I provided a plain language statement outlining the project, a privacy notice explaining the use of their responses and personal data protection protocols, and a list of interview questions to ensure that respondents were fully informed about the research process. Respondents could review these documents in either English or Russian before the interview.

Before each interview, I asked participants if they had any questions or concerns. Each participant signed a consent form that emphasized their right to withdraw from the research at any time up until mid-September 2024 when data analysis would begin. All interviews were conducted in private, unattended rooms to ensure confidentiality. The interview data was securely stored in the university cloud, with access restricted to me. Additionally, I committed to deleting the data once the dissertation was submitted and the work was completed.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

3.1. Theoretical framework

Given the selection of experts and the identified gap in the literature concerning the mechanisms employed by civil society organizations and initiatives in the resettlement of former political prisoners, this paper adopts the theoretical framework proposed by sociologists (Collins and Evans 2002). Their work introduces a typology of expertise, including what they term ‘contributory expertise.’

Collins and Evans define contributory expertise as “enough expertise to contribute to the science of the field being analyzed” (Collins and Evans, 2002:254). I also chose ‘exploratory expert interviews,’ suggested by Bogner and Menz (2009).

Belarus, during the period from 2020 to 2024, is the country to experience a significant number of individuals detained for political reasons and subsequently becoming political prisoners. The experts working with these individuals are not only practitioners but also

active participants in producing new knowledge in this field, even if they may not fully recognize their role as such. Moreover, they draw on concepts and theories from a range of scientific disciplines—including psychology, medicine, and criminology—which fosters interdisciplinary knowledge creation. This integrative approach combines diverse perspectives and methodologies to enhance our understanding of the complex process of resettlement of former political prisoners. ‘Exploratory expert interviews’ may be used in this case because the topic of this thesis seems to be under-researched, and interviews with the experts may assist in generating initial hypotheses in the domain of resettlement of female political prisoners after their release.

3.2. Conceptualization

3.2.1. Political prisoners

Crimes the state considers to be politically motivated have existed for centuries; this type of crime is probably one of the oldest (Schafer 1972). A person who commits a crime for political reasons is guided by his or her values, which to him or her are more just and right than those established by the ruling political power. However, it has the exclusive power and right to define those values and to persecute those who refuse to adhere to them (Schafer 1972).

For many centuries, people with views that were undesirable to the authorities were imprisoned to exclude them from political life. Captivity prevented them from continuing their political work (Kenney 2012). Until the late nineteenth century, regimes treated political prisoners leniently (Kenney 2012). For example, they were not held in solitary confinement, and thus, in theory, could spread their ideas and beliefs to other prisoners. Furthermore, the prison itself was perceived as an intermediate stage of punishment: political prisoners who did not leave prison could be executed (Kenney 2012). Nonetheless, from the mid-nineteenth century, political imprisonment became one of the methods of political struggle. It was used by Russian revolutionaries fighting against the monarchy and Irish independence fighters.

In the first half of the 20th century, the idea that people should not be persecuted for their beliefs, including political beliefs, spread in many countries. After World War II, this statement was enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly¹⁰. In 2012, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recognized¹¹ the status of ‘political prisoner’ and defined the criteria as follows:

“a. if the detention has been imposed in violation of one of the fundamental guarantees set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and its Protocols (ECHR), in particular

¹⁰ United Nations website. (n.d.). ‘Universal Declaration of Human Rights. (10 December 1948)’, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>, consulted on 17.9.24.

¹¹ Parliamentary Assembly website. (n.d.). ‘The definition of political prisoner. (3 October 2012)’, <https://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=19150&lang=en>, consulted on 17.9.24.

freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of assembly and association;

b. if the detention has been imposed for purely political reasons without connection to any offense;

c. if, for political motives, the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly out of proportion to the offense the person has been found guilty of or is suspected of;

d. if, for political motives, he or she is detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons; or,

e. if the detention is the result of proceedings which were unfair and this appears to be connected with political motives of the authorities.' (SG/Inf(2001)34, paragraph 10).”

Nevertheless, the term has never entered international law, and the academic community has no unified concept. Steinert (2021), after analyzing all definitions of political prisoners in academic papers between 1956 and 2019, proposed his concept. According to him, a political prisoner is a person who has been convicted and sent to prison because of ‘politically biased trials’ (Steinert 2021: 3). By these, he means situations where judges do not make independent decisions but rely on government preferences and where they have “(a) lack a domestic legal basis, (b) violate principles of procedural justice, or (c) violate universal human rights”. (Steinert 2021: 3).

Amnesty International, a reputable human rights organization, recognizes people who are persecuted for political reasons as political prisoners, emphasizing that they may use violence or justify it (Amnesty International handbook 2002). Those who do not use violence or hate speech directed at their opponents and are persecuted for their political position, skin color, gender, language, ethnicity, or religion are called 'prisoners of conscience' by Amnesty International.

3.2.2. Definition of Political Prisoner in Belarus

In this thesis, I will rely on the definition of 'political prisoner', proposed by a group of human rights defenders from Belarus, Azerbaidzhan, Lithuania, Poland, Georgia, Russia, and Ukraine in a guideline¹² in October 2013. I use this concept because my study focuses on Belarusian political prisoners. I apply the data from Belarusian sources and experts who rely on the data of the human rights organization Viasna (the main one focusing on political prisoners in the state), having worked on this guideline.

¹²Spring 96 website. (2013). ‘Guidelines on Definition of Political Prisoner’, https://spring96.org/files/misc/politprisoner-guidelines-final_en.pdf, consulted on 18.9.24.

The working group refined the key terms 'deprivation of liberty', 'political motivation', and 'political prisoners,' using the experience of the Council of Europe, Amnesty International, and national human rights organizations from different countries. In this thesis, I concentrate only on the term 'political prisoners'. The others are mentioned in the aforesaid guideline.

According to the experts, a person deprived of liberty might be regarded as a political prisoner if at least one of the following criteria is observed:

“a) the detention has been imposed solely because of their political, religious or other beliefs, as well as non-violent exercise of freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of expression and information, freedom of peaceful assembly and association, and other rights and freedoms guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) or the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (ECHR);

b) the detention has been imposed solely for activities aimed at defending human rights and fundamental freedoms;

c) the detention has been imposed solely on the basis of gender, race, color, language, religion; national, ethnic, social or class origin; birth, nationality, sexual orientation and gender identity, property or other status, or on other basis, or due to their firm links with communities united on this basis.”¹³

A person deprived of liberty is also may be regarded as a political prisoner if at least one of the below criteria is observed, as well as political reasons for their prosecution:

“a) the detention has been imposed in violation of the right to a fair trial, other rights and freedoms guaranteed by the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights or European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms;

b) the detention was based on falsification of evidence of the alleged offense, or imposed in the absence of the event or elements of the offense, or imposed in connection with an offense committed by another person;

c) the length of the detention or its conditions are clearly disproportionate (incommensurate) to the offense the person is suspected, accused or has been found guilty of;

¹³ Ibid. (page 2).

d) the person has been detained in a discriminatory manner as compared to other persons.”¹⁴

3.3. Resettlement

As McNeill and Graham (2018) note, there is no single concept to describe the process of a prisoner reentering society after release. Different studies refer to it as “resettlement, rehabilitation, re-entry, or reformation” (McNeill and Graham, 2018: 366). There are plenty of other terms, such as: re-insertion, re-classification, resocialization, social reintegration, and social readaptation, describing the same phenomena.

Dünkel et al. (2018) highlights that “from a linguistic perspective, prisoner re-entry refers more to the moment of release, while resettlement implies a goal” (Dünkel et al., 2018: 7). This goal may be described as prisoner rehabilitation, reintegration, or social inclusion. However, as Dünkel et al. (2018) point out, this understanding of the process is problematic, as “many adult prisoners were not 'settled' before imprisonment and often lack the social structures to 're-enter' ” (Dünkel et al., 2018: 7).

The researchers refer to the term 'resettlement' to describe measures, strategies, initiatives, and collaborative efforts that assist prisoners in transitioning from incarceration back into society. The authors analyze not only the post-release period but also release preparation within prison and probation.

Although my thesis will primarily focus on post-release issues faced by former female political prisoners and the efforts of civil society groups to address them, I believe the concept of resettlement accurately describes the processes I intend to observe.

3.4 Civil society and its actors

Edwards (2011) notes that the concept of civil society is one of the most confusing in social science. Many different definitions and interpretations are often poorly connected to each other. They also vary depending on the region of the world and political beliefs (Jensen 2006; Walzer 1995).

According to Walzer (1998), in civil society, people, acting voluntarily and independently from the government and the market, take collective action together to reach essential goals. Carothers (1999) points out that actors of civil society include interest groups, labor unions, non-governmental organizations, and, in general, all the other organizations and associations that exist outside of the state and the market.

Since, in this thesis, I have conducted interviews with the representatives of NGOs, grassroots initiatives, or associations, I provide the meanings of these terms.

¹⁴ Ibid. (page 2-3).

As Smith (2011) points out, non-profit organizations are a distinct category of associations within civil society. It is characterized by adherence to a high level of formal procedures at many levels. Non-profit organizations must have legal registration, and their funding is likely dominated by grants rather than member contributions. NGOs serve as intermediaries between the community and the state (as well as other actors). Interestingly, there are so-called social enterprises that combine both nonprofit and for-profit elements. Depending on their chosen funding model, they can generate income and use it to support their mission (Bornstein, 2007; Brainard and Lael, 2008).

Kunreuther (2011) highlights that associations create spaces where people can address issues that the government or private sector often overlook or that help community members engage in democratic activities. Grassroots initiatives tend to be less hierarchical and less accountable to external institutions, with much of their work driven by volunteers and focused on local issues. The barriers to joining such organizations are low, with people participating voluntarily. Due to the lack of hierarchy, members must collectively discuss how the association will operate the outcomes they want to achieve, set clear goals, and define the scope of their activities.

4. Literature review

In different years, scholars have explored political incarceration histories in Northern Ireland (Mcconville 2005), Greece (Voglis 2002), India (Singh 2000), Romania (Bichescu et.al, 2005), Poland (Machcewicz 2019), etc. Specifically, researchers studied Palestinian political prisoners' identities (Nashif 2008), the challenges that their families face (Giacaman and Johnson, 2013) after their detention, or the power of journaling practices for political prisoners in the apartheid era in South Africa (Gready 1993).

A significant amount of research has examined the psychological and psychiatric effects of political imprisonment (Kanninen, Punamäki, and Qouta 2002; Salo, Qouta, and Punamäki 2005; Bauer et al., 1993), including PTSD (Maercker et al., 2013) and the torture that political prisoners endure, including sexual violence (Agger 1989). Willis, Chou, and Hunt (2015), in a systematic review of the effects of political imprisonment on mental health based on eight studies, concluded that common symptoms experienced by ex-political prisoners include PTSD, depression, and anxiety. These symptoms persisted after release due to a lack of resocialization, employment or educational opportunities, social support, and, in general, social isolation.

Ehlers, Maercker, and Boos (2000) analyzed that former political prisoners with chronic PTSD more prone to experiencing a sense of mental defeat and a general feeling of disconnection from others. They noted that ex-political prisoners with chronic PTSD are more likely to perceive negative or permanent changes in their personalities or life aspirations.

Baçoğlu (1994) examined factors influencing the long-term psychological well-being of political ex-prisoners who endured systematic torture in Turkey. In particular, he analyzed how the impact of imprisonment on various life areas (e.g., family and social relationships, economic and employment status), along with other post-captivity psychosocial stressors, (PTSD symptoms, anxiety, and depression).

Sarraj et al. (1996), analyzing the data, obtained from 550 male Palestinian former political prisoners from the Gaza Strip, made a conclusion that “the more a prisoner had been exposed to physical, chemical and electric torture, psychological ill-treatment, and sensory deprivation or bombardment, the more he subsequently suffered from intrusive reexperiencing, withdrawal and numbness, and hyperarousal” (Sarraj et al. 1996:1). There is also a connection among re-experiences of trauma and the length of prison sentence, health issues during the imprisonment, harassment during arrest and after release, the relationship with family members, marital status, and economic challenges. Punamäki et al. (2002) also described the defensive mechanisms that Palestinian former political prisoners had used to deal with tortures in detention.

Mollica et al. (2009) revealed that former Vietnamese political prisoners exhibited brain lesions that were associated with the severity of their depressive symptoms as a consequence of their political imprisonment. Crescenzi et al. (2002) examined the impact of political imprisonment on anxiety, depression, and somatic symptoms reported by Tibetan refugees in India in 1995.

In some cases, when academics conducted their research, they chose both male and female political prisoners, but their results were not gender-specific (Maercker et al., 2013; (Maercker, Beauducel, and Schützwohl, 2000). So, only several pieces of research focus on women's political imprisonment in detail.

For instance, Corcoran (2006) described the experiences of Northern Irish activists, while Scott (2018) wrote about the resistance of female political prisoners in India from 1975-1977. Moreover, Kis (2020) examined the experience of Ukrainian female political prisoners in the GULAG system in the USSR. MacKinnon (2019) also referred to the GULAG system, analyzing the memories of four ex-political prisoners who served their sentences along with their young children. As the researcher noted, while these women experienced psychological and emotional stress due to the rupture in family relations and separation from their children, being mothers in the camps gave them the motivation to stay alive. Fried (2006) researched the emergence and development of testimonial projects of female political imprisonment in Uruguay that were forgotten due to the governmental 'policies of oblivion' of the dictatorship. Likewise, Gray and Coonan (2013) highlighted that they used a purposive sampling method to research female political prisoners in Tunisia.

Romero and Xóse (2014), and Aretxaga (2001) explored how female bodies were used 'as political weapons' by the prison officers who violently abused political prisoners. In addition, Mrvová (2019) told the story of female political prisoners in Czechoslovakia and their

detention practices aimed at preserving their identity in prison. Also, Taczyńska (2019) reflected on how female political prisoners in *Goli Otok* prison in former Yugoslavia used nature as a coping mechanism to reduce stress and find inner peace in custody. Furthermore, Richmond (2010) researched how female political prisoners from DDR used a journaling practice to get their identity back. Similarly, Waxman (2021) reported the influence of music on female political prisoners in Chile during the Pinochet rule.

Some scholars focus on the consequences of political imprisonment and resettlement of political prisoners, but this topic is also under-researched. In selected cases, the authors explored the role of financial compensation and fair justice for former political prisoners from the Czech Republic who experienced political violence during the years of communist rule (David and Choi, 2005). Lakin et al. (2021) also noted that male political prisoners, after release in Myanmar, identified masculinity, community leadership, self-confidence, morality, and honesty as their defining characteristics. The desire for self-help, the reinforcement of these qualities, and misunderstandings about the goals of psychotherapy were often key factors in their decision to undergo psychotherapy or not.

Notable exceptions in the systematic research on the follow-up of released political prisoners are the cases of Northern Ireland, the German Democratic Republic, and Palestine.

In reviewing the academic literature, it is evident that researchers studying Northern Ireland have made significant contributions to understanding the post-release lives of political prisoners from both sociological and anthropological perspectives. As will be discussed below, in many other cases, scholars have chosen to focus exclusively on the psychological aspects of this phenomenon. However, McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath (2004) reflected on the post-prison experiences of former political prisoners and their families. In interviews with former political prisoners, researchers discovered that many faced significant health issues after their release, which they attributed to prison beatings, harsh imprisonment conditions, as well as post-release challenges like alcohol abuse and socio-economic deprivation. Some former prisoners reported experiencing symptoms of PTSD, a condition also observed by their family members, and described their psychological state as 'bad' or 'very bad.'

Relatives of former prisoners shared that even a decade or more after release (10-12 years), their partners continued to struggle with fear and anxiety. Researchers also highlighted a notably high divorce rate among the ex-prisoners interviewed —52%, which is 17% higher than the average for Belfast, where they resided. A particular strain on relationships was noted, as partners reported that the ex-prisoners were often unable or unwilling to form emotional closeness with their families following their release.

Another significant finding was the ex-prisoners lack of awareness of the social changes that had taken place during their incarceration. This led to heightened reactions to the appearance and behavior of younger generations, such as piercings, tattoos, recreational drug use, and shifts in attitudes towards sexual behavior. Many ex-prisoners also expressed concerns that

they had lost the camaraderie they once shared with fellow inmates and now felt disconnected from people who had not experienced imprisonment.

The study also found high levels of social isolation among former political prisoners, including unemployment. Researchers concluded that “despite the violence, suffering, and deprivation associated with the experience of resistance, this life provided a structure and confidence that many former prisoners in transition lacked” (McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath, 2004: 659).

Later, Shirlow, Tonge, and McAuley (2014) described the social reconciliation experienced by political prisoners following an active phase of conflict there. Nisbett and Rapson (2020) examined how some of the ex-political prisoners from Northern Ireland provided guide tours in Belfast, telling the history of *The Troubles* first hand. Researchers concluded that this approach helps competing narratives about the roots of the conflict to coexist and allows divergent viewpoints to be tolerated, which is politically crucial for maintaining peace. Moreover, the researchers confirm that this approach assists marginalized people to represent themselves and reflect their experiences.

Rolston and Artz (2014), comparing the resettlement experiences of former political prisoners in Northern Ireland and South Africa, concluded that the main difficulties faced by former prisoners were related to finding a new job, a place to live, and accessing health care. They also observed that political prisoners experienced psychological problems, some of which were linked to the fact that their basic needs were not being met. In addition, the researchers pointed out that, in many cases, the families of political prisoners in both South Africa and Northern Ireland had broken apart.

Hunt and Willis (2022), analyzing nine interviews with former political prisoners from Northern Ireland, noted that the interviewees faced the same challenges as anyone who had spent a long time in prison, but they were also discriminated against for being labeled as 'terrorists' and due to societal issues during the transition period. They observed that former political prisoners felt supported by their families and comrades, both during imprisonment and after their release. Additionally, the interviewees expressed no regret about their involvement in political activities, acknowledging that their actions were consistent with the historical context in which they lived.

A separate, extensive body of research on the effects of political imprisonment focuses on the experiences of citizens of the German Democratic Republic and the Soviet occupation zone of Germany after the Second World War. Maslahati et al. (2022) highlighted the numerous psychological problems associated with political imprisonment and noted that these issues can be passed down through generations, becoming a form of generational trauma. Weißflog et al. (2010) concluded that even many years after political imprisonment, former prisoners reported significantly higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to non-imprisoned individuals matched by age and gender. Kleim et al. (2013) observed that 37 years after release, former political prisoners who received social support were better able to recall

specific memories rather than engage in generalized reflections. Weißflog et al. (2012) also found that former political prisoners from the GDR and the Soviet occupation zone, years after their release, complained of somatic illnesses, which researchers linked to their political imprisonment.

Quencel et.al (2024) discovered that former political prisoners experienced resentment, which negatively affected their psychological and physical well-being. Additionally, Weißflog et al. (2024) concluded that some symptoms of chronic PTSD (such as hyperexcitability and intrusive thoughts) in former political prisoners were reduced when they socialized with romantic partners and children. Schuitzwol (2000) observed that anger, often accompanying PTSD in political prisoners, may also be alleviated through social support.

Furthermore, several studies have also examined the effects of political imprisonment on Palestinians. Kanninen, Punamäki, and Qouta (2002) concluded that individuals with secure and insecure attachment styles among political prisoners are affected differently by physical and psychological torture. Salo, Quota, and Punamäki (2005) found that Palestinian former political prisoners experienced a reduction in post-traumatic symptoms with individual psychotherapy, while no improvement was observed in group therapy sessions over a one-year period. Additionally, they noted a general reduction in somatic symptoms.

It is important to mention that the consequences of political imprisonment and resettlement of political prisoners are by at large not gender studied. In the aforementioned studies, the results for women, if they were included in the research at all, were not analyzed or conceptualized separately. Not so many academics specifically studied the consequence of political imprisonment and resettlement among women.

In general, researchers described the impact of torture on the physical and mental health of female political prisoners in Lebanon (Ghaddar, Elsouri, and Abboud, 2016) and the impact of imprisonment on their relationships with family and partners in Northern Ireland (Corcoran 2006). McEvoy (1999) examined the impact of politically motivated imprisonment on the partners of former detainees.

Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) paid attention to the Belarusian former female political prisoners' consequences of incarceration. They noted that the interviewed former detainees developed a sense of sympathy for the prison guards and even attempted to justify the actions of those working for repressive structures. Researchers also observed that, after their release, the women experienced strong feelings of guilt and gratitude toward their family members while also noting that imprisonment had caused them significant psychological trauma. Additionally, some women severed previous social connections after their release, such as closing or creating new social media accounts, avoiding certain people, or emigrating from the country altogether. According to the study, the majority of the women interviewed expressed a continued commitment to their civic stance, with only one interviewee showing less resolve in her desire to oppose Lukashenka's regime — likely due to having endured direct physical violence.

However, as mentioned above, the area of the effects of political imprisonment and the resettlement of political prisoners from a gender lens remains under-researched.

Another important topic that deserves attention is the role of civil society in supporting political prisoners. Some scholars have examined this by focusing on examples of political prisoners in various countries. For example, Armstrong (1985) explored how the International Committee of the Red Cross became involved in advocating for the rights of political prisoners. Lowe (2014) concentrated exclusively on the activity of the International Committee of the Red Cross in protecting the individual rights of political prisoners in Soviet Russia. Godwin (2022) researched the role of diasporas (American Jews and Vietnamese) in the late twentieth century in the release of political prisoners in the Soviet Union and Vietnam.

Nevertheless, a review of the research on the role of civil society in supporting former political detainees after their release reveals a gap in the literature. Only some scholars have explored it to some extent.

For instance, Park (2014) explored the role of the Association of Former Political Prisoners of Córdoba, which was formed in 2007 by former Argentine political detainees. The author explained why the political prisoners waited almost three decades before forming their own organization and explained their motives to recall their memories of solidarity and resistance during the dictatorial past.

McEvoy and Shirlow (2009) described how former political prisoners and ex-combatants from Northern Ireland joined independent community organizations—such as housing associations, neighborhood regeneration projects, youth diversionary initiatives, and community education programs. Before McEvoy (1999) also included in their research the role of statutory or voluntary organizations in assisting political prisoners from Northern Ireland in custody and after release. Taking on roles as managers, staff, or volunteers, they worked collectively to promote peace. Rolston and Artz (2014) also mentioned supporting groups in civil society that assisted former political prisoners in Northern Ireland and South Africa in different aspects of their resettlement.

Furthermore, Pinerová (2024) explored how the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters established a broad network of rehabilitation commissions and consultancy centers at various levels across Czechoslovakia in the 1968-1970. The scholar pointed out that these effectively assisted former political prisoners in overturning unjust sentences and securing compensation for wrongful prosecution.

Even fewer researchers have explored how grassroots associations or organizations supported female political prisoners after their release. Only a handful of studies address this topic. For instance, Lestariningsih and Sunarti (2023) explored how female political prisoners in Indonesia recollected reproducing identity after release through a choir group consisting of

former female political prisoners and their relatives. The researchers pointed out that this choir group aimed to alter public perception of female ex-political prisoners' identity. All in all, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding whether civil society groups incorporate a gender lens in the resettlement of former female political prisoners.

5. Context

5.1. Characteristics of the political regime in post-socialist Belarus

According to the latest Freedom in the World index presented by Freedom House in 2024¹⁵, Belarus scored 2 out of 40 in political rights and 6 out of 60 in civil liberties, making it one of the most repressive autocracies in the world.

The head of state, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, was not elected through free and fair elections five times—in 2001, 2006, 2010, 2015, and 2020 (Astapova et al., 2022), as well as national legislative representatives. The latest election, on the 26th of January 2025, is rejected by the European Union as well¹⁶. Moreover, Freedom House experts assert that the legal framework for the elections does not meet democratic standards, people in Belarus do not have the right to form political parties, and the system is designed with obstacles that prevent any political organization from gaining power. The measures to combat corruption are insufficient, posing a threat to the prosperity of the 70% state-controlled economy.

Freedom House experts also conclude that there are no free and independent media outlets based in Belarus, academic freedom is undermined by political indoctrination, and people are unable to freely express their personal beliefs and views on political and sensitive topics. Those who take these risks usually end up in prison. Furthermore, independent nongovernmental organizations, trade unions, and other civil society entities are unable to operate freely in Belarus, as they face the threat of being labeled as extremists. That is why all the participants who work in the third sector are anonymized in this thesis and are not going to visit Belarus any time soon.

Belarusian citizens also cannot rely on a just and fair legal system and are at risk of being tortured or subjected to illegitimate use of physical force while being under arrest. Although the authorities pressure individuals with opposing political views to leave the country, in 2023, the president prohibited Belarusians abroad from renewing or extending their passports, registering power of attorney, verifying marital status, registering births, or confirming their education, which may worsen the process of emigration or/and resettlement for former political prisoners.

¹⁵ Freedom House. (2024). 'Belarus', <https://freedomhouse.org/country/belarus/freedom-world/2024>, consulted on 25.9.24.

¹⁶ Associated Press. 'EU rejects election in Belarus and threatens new sanctions,' <https://apnews.com/article/eu-rejects-belarus-election-7398527b65def27b6927b0286beef83>, consulted on 26.1.25

5.2. 2020 Belarusian political crisis

By the end of 2024, Belarusian human-rights organizations have recognized 3,696 people (680 among them are women) as political prisoners since summer 2020¹⁷. Therefore, mentioning those events that led to this number of people being deprived of liberty is worthwhile in this thesis.

Frear (2024) notes that the lack of needed reaction to COVID-19 from the government, the spread of social networks, the collapse of the social contract with the Lukashenka regime (where loyalty was exchanged for stability, Frear, 2018), and the political mistakes made by the regime (Moshes and Nizhnikau, 2021) formulated a clear demand of a new leader of the state in 2020 presidential elections. Moreover, the majority of the population was dissatisfied with the economic situation in the country, which, along with a tense relationship with the Russian government, on which Belarus was economically dependent, made it almost impossible for Lukashenka and his regime to calm the citizens down before the election and guarantee them stability.

Against this backdrop, opposition candidates who previously had no political experience but had established themselves in civil society decided to run in the presidential elections. Sergey Tikhanovsky is a well-known anti-corruption Belarusian blogger who drew support from environmental activists in Brest, in the western part of the country. Viktor Babariko, head of Belgazprombank, attracted participants from various civil society movements, many of whom he had supported in his professional work (such as charitable foundations, cultural projects, and crowdfunding platforms). Valery Tsepikalo, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus and co-founder and director of the High-Tech Park, mobilized IT volunteers to build infrastructure enabling citizen participation in local electoral commissions, aiming to prevent widespread electoral fraud (Astapova et al. 2022).

The arrest of the opponents of the regime, who claimed their intention to participate in the presidential election, induced the Belarusian people to consolidate around Svetlana Tikhanovskaya. In the summer of 2020, she was a teacher and the wife of the popular YouTube anti-corruption blogger and activist Syarhey Tsikhanousky. When he was arrested, running as a presidential candidate, she became an oppositional leader who could represent the democratic sentiments of the Belarusian society.

Lukashenka allowed her candidacy because he did not perceive her as a threat. Tikhanovskaya ran a huge election campaign, her clear program responded to many people who voted for her because they trusted her and believed she could change the political situation. However, Lukashenka took a desperate step, forcing the Central Election Committee to announce him as the only winner. It provoked massive protests.

¹⁷ Spring96 website. 'The situation with human rights in Belarus in 2023,' <https://spring96.org/ru/news/117167>, consulted on 27.01.25.

Lukashenka's siloviki brutally oppressed the protesters, torturing them in the police departments and arresting people if they demonstrated their oppositional opinions and pro-democratic position. The regime was unable to cope with the large-scale protests on its own, prompting Lukashenka to seek assistance and support from Russia. At the end of August 2020, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced¹⁸ that a reserve force of security personnel had been established to aid Belarus. However, it remains unclear¹⁹ whether Russian special police units were actually involved in suppressing protests and assaulting demonstrators in Belarus. Nevertheless, Moscow promised²⁰ Minsk received a state loan of \$1.5 billion over two years, which, according to Moshes and Nizhnikau (2021), Lukashenka used to support the economy amid international sanctions for violation of human rights and the exodus of major IT companies from the country.

According to the Belarusian Investigative Committee, since the beginning of the campaign for the 2020 presidential election in Belarus, more than 5,500 criminal cases have been initiated in the country related to protests against the results of the presidential elections. Massive repressions forced²¹ around 220 thousand people to leave the country after the 2020 protests, including independent journalists, human rights activists, people who participated in the protests, and political prisoners after the release.

5.3. Civil society in Belarus and the aftermath of the 2020 crisis

Since in this thesis, I pay attention to the role of civil society in the resettlement of former political prisoners analyze its programs and relationships within the group, it is important to mention how the independent third sector had operated in Belarus before the mass protests in 2020 and what has changed since that time.

Many scholars believe that a strong civil society is crucial for the establishment and consolidation of democratic governance. Diamond (1994) notes that civil society assists in democratizing authoritarian regimes, while Toepler et al. (2020) highlight, that civil society, even when operating informally or under repression, contributes to the dissolution of non-democratic regimes. Therefore, authoritarian regimes make significant efforts to weaken civil society through three primary strategies: legitimizing state-controlled civil society by creating organizations closely tied to the government, co-opting independent CSOs, or repressing them.

¹⁸ Polyakova, V. (2020). 'Putin announced the creation of a reserve of law enforcement officers for Belarus', <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f478b809a7947e8079f1cb7>, consulted on 25.9.24.

¹⁹ Zerkalo. (2023). 'Did the Russian OMON participate in the dispersal of the 2020 protests or not? We asked BELPOL', <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/44582.html>, consulted on 25.9.24.

²⁰ Mingazov. S. (2022). 'Russia granted Belarus a deferral on loans for five to six years', <https://www.forbes.ru/finansy/459635-rossia-predostavila-belorussii-otsrocku-po-kreditam-na-pat-sest-let>, consulted on 25.9.24.

²¹ Nasha Niva. (2024). 'Nearly as many as Grodno and Brest combined. This is how many Belarusians have left in recent years', <https://nashaniva.com/ru/342430>, consulted on 25.9.24.

5.3.1. Before 2020

Astapova et al. (2022) highlight that, until 2020, there were still some areas of society where Belarusian people could act independently. For example, grassroots initiatives focused on housing, urban development, searching for missing children, supporting orphans, people with disabilities, and the elderly, assisting the poor, children with health problems, and other vulnerable groups. They typically addressed local issues despite several laws that made it difficult for independent NGOs to operate, imposing severe penalties for unauthorized activities.

However, when it came to civil society associations that were involved in Belarusian politics or whose actions were perceived as 'oppositional' by the regime, Lukashenka consistently suppressed them throughout his rule. To achieve this, he employed both legislative restrictions and forceful tactics, such as violence by law enforcement agencies, hefty fines, and prison sentences for activists and protesters (Astapova et al., 2022).

In the six years leading up to 2020, Lukashenka shifted his approach to co-opting civil society while simultaneously continuing to impose strict restrictions on political collective actions. Astapova et al. (2022) count several factors why it happened. First, the political leadership of Belarus feared that mass public discontent caused by the worsening economic situation would be difficult to suppress, so they decided to allow people to release their accumulated energy in a controlled and politically harmless way.

Second, by 2014, the Belarusian security apparatus had learned to monitor protest activity on the internet and systematically repressed those who called for it, enabling a clear distinction between permitted activities and politically prohibited ones.

Third, by the mid-2010s, half of Belarusian society trusted grassroots civic initiatives twice as much as they trusted local politicians and officials. Fourth, some components of Belarusian civil society focused on promoting native cultural heritage, history, the use of the Belarusian language, and a distinct Belarusian identity. This was beneficial to Lukashenka, who feared the destruction of Belarusian identity due to Russia's war against Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2014. "Outsourcing this identity shift to civil society also protected Lukashenka from accusations of disloyalty from Moscow for directly supporting what the Kremlin would have perceived as anti-Russian nationalism," note Astapova et al. (2022: 9).

Finally, cooperating with civil society rather than suppressing it allowed Lukashenka to maintain more or less constructive relations with the U.S. and the EU, which was necessary given the increasingly difficult relations with Russia that degraded in 2014 when Russia annexed Crimea and began an invasion of Ukraine. Frear (2024) assumes that this factor, as well as the deterioration of the Belarusian economy due to the global financial crisis in 2008 and the Russian reluctance to support the economic sector without anything in return, induced Lukashenka to pay much more attention to the issues of Belarusian sovereignty and security.

As a result, some laws restricting NGO activities were relaxed, allowing them to secure funding through crowdfunding on official Belarusian platforms and from foreign sponsors (though this support was strictly controlled). Some state officials participated in events organized by independent NGOs, and businesses openly donated to independent civic initiatives. Due to these changes in state policy toward civil society in the mid-2010s, the number of officially recognized associations in Belarus increased, and some civil society organizations that supported Belarusians operated from abroad or even involved opposition politicians.

Astapova et al. (2022) points out that at the beginning of 2020, during COVID-19, Belarusian civil society reached its peak in cooperation, coordination, and the ability to assist a huge number of people effectively. It demonstrated its flexibility, speed, and reliability in reacting to the citizens' needs, contrasted by the clumsy and slow reaction of the authorities to face a massive and serious crisis. The presidential election campaign started in Belarus at the height of the pandemic.

Astapova et al. (2022) conclude that the years of apolitical activities allowed Belarusian civil society to build an infrastructure for collective actions (for example, actors, communication strategies, support from private businesses, the usage of IT, etc.), become mature and able to act independently. The researchers believe that that was the power that civil society could use for political actions, especially in unstable situations for this authoritarian regime.

As a result, the thousands of Belarusian citizens in late spring to early summer 2020 could unite in many different cities in the state to add signatures for independent candidates without earlier political experience that was not vetted by the regime. That time the Belarusian society understood that there were so many people in the country who disagreed with the regime and who were ready for huge political changes.

Saved energy for political actions made it possible for Belarusian society to mobilize people quickly. The United Office of Oppositional Candidates, led by Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, organized mass meetings before the election and developed IT infrastructure, allowing people opposed to the regime to coordinate their actions and build the channels that were monitoring the course of the presidential election. The volunteers were using their tools and platforms to help people who got hurt and tortured due to the protests, and the NGO helped those who were fined or lost their jobs for political reasons.

5.3.2. After 2020

The regime's response to the unification of various civil society organizations in support of protesters was sustained.

In July 2021, at a government meeting, Lukashenka compared²² NGOs to “bandits and foreign agents,” acknowledging that a “cleansing” of the entire civil society sector was underway. In July 2021, he also claimed²³ that there were “185 destructive entities posing a potential threat to national security.”

As of the 23rd of September 2024, 239 organizations, formations, or individual entrepreneurs were recognized as 'extremist' in Belarus. Human rights activists point out²⁴ that among the groups labeled as extremist are independent media outlets, bloggers' social media networks, human rights and non-profit organizations (including those assisting political prisoners or their families), Telegram channels, private messaging groups, a music band, as well as various public organizations and initiatives.

The Belarusian Investigative Committee claimed that independent NGOs and media outlets were allegedly evading taxes, financing protest activities, and not adhering to the objectives outlined in their charters. The Prosecutor's Office alleged that civil society organizations were supposedly ‘preparing and carrying out mass riots and extremist actions against Belarus.’²⁵

Belarusian law provides criminal penalties for creating or participating in an extremist formation or organization, with sentences ranging from three to seven years in prison. As a result, according to the human rights organization Lawtrend,²⁶ as of late August 2024, six human rights defenders, many representatives of civil society organizations and religious groups, and 32 members of professional unions and labor movements remain imprisoned for their professional activities and involvement in civil society organizations. Additionally, 117 civil society actors abroad have been arrested in absentia. Those who did not want to follow in their footsteps decided to emigrate.

There are also penalties for assisting an extremist formation or organization, which can result in two to six years in prison. 'Assistance' covers a broad range of actions, including commenting on posts, sharing content on social media, receiving financial support, or giving interviews to media outlets.

²²Kostenko V. (2021). ‘ ‘Bandits and Foreign Agents’: Dozens of Independent Organizations Liquidated in Belarus’,

www.dsnews.ua/world/bandity-i-inostrannye-agenty-v-belarusi-likvidiruyut-desyatki-nepравitelstvennyh-organizatsiy-24072021-432073, consulted on 27.9.24.

²³ Spring96 website. (2021). ‘Liquidation of Civil Society. Full List of NGOs Facing Pressure from Belarusian Authorities. Updated’, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/104540>, consulted on 27.9.24.

²⁴ Spring96 website. (2023). ‘Now I am fully an organization.’ Everything you need to know about 'extremist organizations’, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/111030>, consulted on 01.10.24.

²⁵ Spring96 website. (2021). ‘Liquidation of Civil Society. Full List of NGOs Facing Pressure from Belarusian Authorities. Updated’, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/104540>, consulted on 27.9.24.

²⁶ Lawtrend website. (2024). ‘Monitoring the Situation with Freedom of Association and the Status of Civil Society Organizations in the Republic of Belarus, August 2024’, <https://www.lawtrend.org/freedom-of-association/monitoring-situatsii-so-svobodoy-assotsiatsii-i-polozheniem-organizatsii-grazhdanskogo-obshchestva-v-respublike-belarus-avgust-2024>, consulted on 27.9.24.

In mid-February 2023, Alexander Lukashenka signed the law ‘On the Foundations of Civil Society,’²⁷ defining civil society, its subjects, and determining the principles and goals of cooperation between the government and civil society. The law also specifies that civil society actors must not engage in activities that promote war or extremist ideologies and should ensure the effective functioning of state institutions – quite weak terms that may be easily falsified. According to the official presidential website²⁸, as of the 1st January 2024, there were 1973 public associations and 19 labor units, which Lukashenka tries to control.

According to Lawtrend report,²⁹ as of August 2024, registered public associations and foundations in Belarus continue to undergo inspections, receive written warnings, and face discreditation in state media. In the four years from August 2020 to August 2024, at least 1,777 independent organizations (including public associations, professional unions, political parties, foundations, non-governmental institutions, associations, and religious organizations) were either liquidated or compelled to initiate their own dissolution.

However, at the same time, Lawtrend experts note that the Belarusian authorities have made a clear public distinction between 'bad' (Western, independent) and 'good' (Belarusian, pro-government) civil society organizations.

5.4. Political prisoners in post-socialist Belarus

According to the most recent official statistics on the prison population provided by Belarusian authorities at the end of 2018, there were 345 prisoners per 100,000 people in the country³⁰. Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) noted that, based on the number of female prisoners per 100,000, Belarus ranks among the countries with the highest female prison populations. However, the researchers also highlighted a common global trend: penitentiary infrastructure in Belarus is not well-suited for women, as the majority of detainees and convicts have historically been men. Additionally, the treatment of prisoners, including the conditions of their detention, falls short of international standards. Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) pointed out that Belarus lacks dedicated remand centers for women, and existing facilities do not provide adequate hygiene and medical services for female detainees.

According to the Belarusian human rights organization Viasna³¹, as of 19 September 2024, there are 1324 political prisoners in Belarus. Another 2245 people have the status of ‘former political prisoner’, as of the same date.

²⁷ National Center for Legislation and Legal Information of the Republic of Belarus website. (2023). ‘Law of the Republic of Belarus. On the foundations of civil society’, <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12300250>, consulted on 27.9.24.

²⁸ Official Internet Portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus. (n.d.). ‘Public associations in Belarus’ <https://president.gov.by/ru/belarus/society/obedinenija>, consulted on 28.9.24.

²⁹ Ibid. (page 14).

³⁰ Fair, H., Walmsley, R., (2021). ‘World Prison Population List’, https://www.prisonstudies.org/sites/default/files/resources/downloads/world_prison_population_list_13th_edition.pdf, consulted on 28.9.24.

³¹ Spring96 website. (n.d.). ‘Political prisoners in Belarus’, <https://prisoners.spring96.org/ru/#list>, consulted on 19.9.24.

Nevertheless, different representatives of the Belarusian opposition claim³² that the numbers of Viasna are undervalued, and as of April 2023, there might be up to 5000 political prisoners in Belarus. According to the ex-political prisoner and former Social Affairs Representative of the United Transitional Cabinet of Belarus (led by Tikhanovskaya) Olha Gorbunova, the actual number of political prisoners may differ from the list of Viasna for various reasons. For instance, it may be the lawyers' strategy in the hope of a shorter criminal term; in some cases, the relatives oppose recognition as a political prisoner for fear of increased repression; political persecution is often disguised under economic or hooliganism articles, etc.

The data, obtained as the result of a self-analysis of the Viasna website, reveals that in Belarus there are 87% (1156) of all current political prisoners are male, 13% (168) are female. In May 2020, before the political crisis erupted, there were four political prisoners in Belarus, and only one of them, the anarchist Nikita Yemelianov, was still in custody.

According to Viasna data sheet³³, in total, 1111 people with the status of political prisoners, who were arrested and judged starting from the 8th of May 2020 (the day when The House of Representatives of the National Assembly of the Republic of Belarus established the date of presidential election for the 9th of August, 2020) to the 19th of September 2024, are still detained. As regards another 212 people with the same status (except Nikita Yemelianov), on the official website, there is no precise information about the date of their arrest. However, for the vast majority of these people the trial took place in 2023-2024. Some of them are still waiting for the appeal; the others are not in custody but were convicted to take 'a treatment' in a psychiatric hospital; the others are unknown to the human rights defenders where they serve sentences. It is important to highlight that some of these 212 people are foreign citizens from Poland, Japan, Russia, Ukraine, etc.

As for people with the status of political prisoners who served their sentences, 78% (1766 people) are men, 12% (479 people) are female. There are 51 ex-political prisoners, whose date of detention was before May 2020 and was indicated on Vienna's website. Among them, more than 50% of people were arrested in 2010, after the presidential elections. The others were arrested in 2009 (one person), 2011 (14 people), 2012 (one person), 2014 (two people), 2016 (one person), 2017 (two people), and 2019 (two people). Six people with status political prisoners died in custody. All of them were arrested between 2020 and 2024.

Current political prisoners hold their sentences with other prisoners all over the country, in penal colonies, open correctional facilities, jails, and prisons. The largest number of political prisoners together (111 people) is concentrated in a penal colony № 15 in Mahilyow in eastern Belarus. Around 106 people are in a penal colony № 3 in the fourth-largest city of Belarus, Vitsyebsk, and 97 people are in a penal colony № 4 for women in Homyel, the second-largest city in Belarus. Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) mention that female political

³² RFI website. (2023). 'In Belarus, there are at least 5,000 political prisoners, and not all of them will live to see freedom', <http://surl.li/suzqjf>, consulted on 19.9.24.

³³ Ibid

prisoners also served their sentences in a penal colony № 24 and in a correctional facility № 21 in the Homyel region.

Political prisoners, being detained or released, reported enormous times about torture. In detail, they complained of beatings from the administration of a colony, inability to receive qualified medical care, overcrowded cells, restriction of correspondence with family and friends, inability to speak Belarusian, detention with people with whom it may be psychologically unsafe to be (for example, child murders or convicted pedophiles)³⁴. In addition, former political prisoners reported cold and dirty cells with mice and bedbugs, unsanitary conditions, lack of warm water and personal hygiene products, inability to take a shower daily, as well as hours of grueling work³⁵. Political prisoners mentioned³⁶ that they were required to wear a yellow triangle on their clothing, allowing the colony administration to easily distinguish them from other prisoners.

Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) noted when the 2020 protests in Belarus first began, *siloviki* initially refrained from using physical violence against women, which helped mobilize the protests to some extent. More women began joining the demonstrations, and in August 2020, even if detained, they were often released quickly, especially if they had young children. Former Belarusian political prisoners interviewed by researchers mentioned that they sensed repressive structures were unprepared for women's involvement in the protests, and patriarchal attitudes influenced the way women were perceived by authorities—as weak and incapable of independent action.

However, researchers pointed out that this approach soon shifted as the regime recognized that the women's protests were well-organized and large in number. Women began to be detained and imprisoned. Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) highlighted that while the repression of men and women was different, with women reportedly being beaten less frequently and severely, the treatment of female detainees was conflicted. *Siloviki* appeared uncertain whether to view female detainees as 'women' (who required sympathy and protection as the 'weaker sex,') or as 'criminals.'

Additionally, the brutality of prison officers varied based on gender. Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024) observed that female officers and guards tended to act more violently, possibly to prove to their male colleagues that they were capable of adhering to the prison's unwritten and established rules. However, there was a notable shortage of female staff, as the researchers also pointed out.

³⁴ Vaskovich, R. (2024). 'Hungry, without visits, letters, or medical assistance. How nearly 1,500 political prisoners are held in Belarusian prisons', <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/usloviyah-soderzhat-belarusi-politzaklyuchennyh/32821399.html>, consulted on 28.9.24.

³⁵ BYSOL website. (n.d.). 'Assistance to freed political prisoners who require medical care', <https://bysol.org/ru/bs/ppwhoneedmedicalcare/>, consulted on 28.9.24.

³⁶ DefendersBelarus website. (2022). 'A yellow triangle was sewn onto the clothing of lawyer Maxim Znak in the colony', <https://www.defendersbelarus.org/news/tpost/hrzrdllu11-advokatu-maksimuznaku-v-kolonii-nashili>, consulted on 28.9.24.

Alexander Lukashenka has repeatedly³⁷ denied the existence of political prisoners in Belarus because, in his own words, “there is no article in our criminal code for political crimes”.³⁸ The journalists from the independent media Zerkalo assume³⁹ that the Belarusian authorities negate the existence of political prisoners in the country because otherwise, they would automatically admit to systematic and serious violations of human rights. Back in 1948, the UN General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which does not allow the persecution of people for any of their beliefs (including political ones). Its violations are considered crimes by the international community.

Nevertheless, the European Union imposed⁴⁰ various sanctions on Belarusian officials who were alleged to be responsible for the crackdown on protesters following the 2020 presidential elections, as well as for the repression of civilians and civil society groups. As at the fifth of August 2024⁴¹ The EU's restrictive measures against Belarus apply to 261 individuals and 37 organizations due to the ongoing internal repression and human rights violations.

Since the beginning of July 2024 until January 2025, Lukashenka has pardoned around 250 political prisoners⁴². However, since that time, 293 new people were recognized as political prisoners in Belarus.

Belarusians may not only face imprisonment for participating in protests but also for actions such as donating to NGOs that support former political prisoners (these numbers are rising annually) or posting comments on social media. Under the current political regime, Belarusian investigators could fabricate different charges that would fall under other articles with longer statutes of limitations. Therefore, new detentions and arrests are likely to continue in the future⁴³.

³⁷ Interfax. (2023). ‘Lukashenko denies the presence of political prisoners in Belarus’, <https://www.interfax.ru/world/886489>, consulted on 28.9.24.

³⁸ Rosenberg, B. S. (2023). ‘Lukashenko: No one came out of the mutiny a hero, Belarus leader tells BBC’, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66122337>, consulted on 28.9.24.

³⁹ Zerkalo. (2023). ‘The authorities insist that there are no political prisoners in the country — but in reality, there are even more than human rights defenders believe. Here's why this is the case’, <https://news.zerkalo.io/economics/44659.html>, consulted on 28.9.24.

⁴⁰ EEAS website. (2020). ‘Belarus: The EU imposed sanctions for repression and election falsification’, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas>, consulted on 28.9.24.

⁴¹ Council of the European Union website. (2024). ‘Belarus: The EU adds 28 more individuals to the list for their involvement in internal repression’, https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/14hdmsxa/press-release-657_24-ru.pdf, consulted on 28.9.24.

⁴² Filks E. Reuters. ‘Exiled rival accuses Lukashenka of playing 'game' with prisoners before Belarus election,’ <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exiled-rival-accuses-lukashenko-playing-game-with-prisoners-before-belarus-2025-01-21/> consulted on 27.01.25

⁴³ Zerkalo. (2023). ‘How much longer will Belarusians be detained for taking to the streets in 2020 and speaking out against the authorities? Explained by a lawyer’, <https://news.zerkalo.io/life/45311.html>, consulted on 28.9.24.

List of terrorists

As of 19th of September, 2024, 459 people both with statuses 'political prisoners' and 'former political prisoners' were included in a list of 'people involved in terrorist activities', compiled by the Committee of State Security (*KGB* in Belarusian). Among them, 14% (66 people) are female, 86% (393 people) are male. As of the 4th of September 2024, this list includes⁴⁴ 1158 people, more than 500 of them are Belarusian.

Individuals on the list face significant financial restrictions. Those who are not imprisoned are prohibited from using money or conducting any financial transactions, such as selling or purchasing property or registering securities transactions, forcing ex-political prisoners to leave Belarus after release, if they are included in this list, that happens regularly. Prisoners on the 'terrorist list' are also unable to receive money, which may be essential for purchasing personal hygiene products or other necessities in prison, making their lives more complicated.

Human rights defenders report that the decree used to place individuals on this list is applied selectively, and the process is extremely chaotic. A person can be removed from the 'terrorist list,' and such cases have occurred in Belarus, for instance, if they passed away.

The list of organizations and individuals involved in terrorist activities, now known as the 'terrorist list,' first appeared in 2011. Initially, it was used to fulfill international obligations in the fight against terrorism and included the names of terrorists wanted internationally. As Viasna mentions⁴⁵, before 2020, only foreign citizens were on the list, but since the fall of 2020, the authorities began using the 'terrorist list' as a repressive tool against people with oppositional beliefs if they are accused of violating one or several articles of the country's Criminal Code (including 'Mass riots', 'Calls for the imposition of restrictive measures (sanctions) and other actions,' etc.)

List of extremists

Viasna does not provide specific information about political prisoners who are included in the 'list of extremists', compiled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. However, it generally counts people who were labeled with this status. As it is the 20th of September 2024, this list includes⁴⁶ 4453 people. Among them, 8 hold Ukrainian citizenship, 5 hold Russian citizenship, one holds Polish citizenship, and one person holds Uzbek citizenship. All others are Belarusian citizens.

People designated as 'extremists' face restrictions such as bans on military service, holding public office, engaging in publishing and teaching, and involvement in activities related to narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances (including potentially medical activities), weapons, ammunition, or explosives. These restrictions remain in effect until the criminal record is

⁴⁴ Spring96 Telegram Channel. (2024). '12 more Belarusians have been added to the 'terrorist list.'', t.me/viasna96/27539, consulted on 29.9.24.

⁴⁵ Spring96 website. (2023). 'And now I am a white-red-white terrorist.' Answering questions about the 'terrorist list', <https://spring96.org/be/news/110678>, consulted on 29.9.24.

⁴⁶ Spring96 Telegram Channel. (2024). '17 more people have been added to the 'Extremists List' — it now contains 4,453 names', <https://t.me/viasna96/27797>, consulted on 01.10.24.

expunged or cleared and for five years thereafter. Additionally, all financial transactions of individuals on the 'extremist list' are under special surveillance by the KGB, as human rights activists have noted. This includes actions such as opening a bank account or transferring funds. It also makes it almost impossible for former political prisoners with this status to stay in Belarus after release.

Viasna points out⁴⁷ that the Ministry of Internal Affairs published the 'List of Belarusian citizens, foreign citizens and stateless persons involved in extremist activities' ('List of extremists') in March 2022. It immediately included several political prisoners.

Viasna highlights that this list primarily includes individuals who participated in the protests following the 2020 presidential election, expressed their dissent with the current regime, or were involved in related activities. All individuals listed have been convicted of criminal offenses, including the charges of 'Participation in mass riots,' 'Insulting a representative of authority,' 'Active participation in actions grossly violating public order,' or 'Participation in an extremist organization.'

The Ministry of Internal Affairs' list includes individuals currently serving sentences, those who have been released, and those whose criminal records have been expunged. Although there are instances where a person may be removed from the 'extremist list,' the specific criteria for removal are not clearly detailed on Viasna's website.

6. Presentation of findings

6.1. Reasons for challenging resettlement of Belarusian former female political prisoners

6.1.1 Conditions of Imprisonment

Most of the experts interviewed discussed the conditions of detention for political prisoners in Belarus. These conditions, as described in the *Context* section, were corroborated by the interviewees.

The expert A. said that, according to their work experience, female political prisoners are also subjected to both psychological and physical torture based on their gender. For example, Belarusian women in custody often are excluded from receiving essential hygiene products such as pads and tampons, so their bodies also are used as 'political weapons', as were described by Romero and Xóse (2014) and Aretxaga (2001). One can deduce that it is one of the reasons why former female political prisoners want to regain their womanhood, as also discussed below.

⁴⁷ Spring96 website. (2022). 'Mom, I am an extremist.' What restrictions are imposed on individuals included in the 'Extremists List?', <https://spring96.org/be/news/109774>, consulted on 01.10.24.

The second interlocutor (B.) stated that *“women’s colonies are much harsher than men’s colonies. The conditions there are unbearable for political prisoners—cold and damp. According to the testimonies of male political prisoners, even they are shocked by what female political prisoners endure.”* It is possible that such conditions are deliberately created in the cells where Belarusian political prisoners are held. However, it is also likely that the overall state of Belarusian prisons, which are architecturally designed for men, is inadequate, a fact that was previously confirmed⁴⁸ by human rights activists. Another expert (G.) confirmed that: *“In Belarusian women’s colonies prisoners are treated the same way as men, without considering special psychological, physiological and other needs.”* G. added that this strongly affects *“their perception of themselves, perception of others.”*

The experts highlighted how these conditions profoundly affect political prisoners after their release, complicating their resettlement in several ways.

Firstly, one interviewee (D.) noted that *“people who are imprisoned fall into an information vacuum; they start to form a completely different reality.”* According to their, because of this isolation, which can last from a year to several years or even longer, after leaving prison, former political prisoners and their relatives *“find it more difficult to establish relations with each other afterward.”* This isolation is the result of denied visits from relatives, letters, or parcels for political prisoners.

Another expert (B.) observed, *“Life on the outside goes on, there are some processes going on, but people fall out of them, and after release, it is much more difficult for them to adapt to them.”* As a result, it can be assumed that, upon leaving prison, former political prisoners struggle to understand the state of society in which they find themselves, as well as the alignment of political forces. Witnessing potential conflicts within the democratic community, along with the outcomes of the most recent presidential election, they may feel that their suffering has been in vain and that their sacrifices have yielded no meaningful results. The interviewee B. supported this assumption, stating that the penitentiary system in Belarus does not aim to rehabilitate individuals but instead focuses on breaking them down and devaluing everything they have done.

D. mentioned that after leaving prison, individuals must *“learn how to live again,”* as they have become accustomed to having everything decided for them. Their routine was dictated by external rules, whereas *“in the outside, you have to do everything on your own,”* told D, which may cause huge stress. This employee of Belarusian civil society noticed: *“There is a common belief among former political prisoners that life was easier in prison. They want to go back because they had friends there, a schedule, and a sense of clarity. After their release, they don’t know what to do next.”* This quote confirms McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath's

⁴⁸ Human Rights House Foundation website. ‘Belarus leading in Europe on numbers of prisoners,’ <https://humanrightshouse.org/articles/belarus-leading-in-europe-on-numbers-of-prisoners-2/>, consulted on 28.1.25.

(2004) findings about the struggles of finding a new meaning in life during the resettlement of political prisoners in Northern Ireland.

Secondly, one interviewee (A.) highlighted that rules in the colonies, such as requiring prisoners to keep their hands behind their backs and prohibiting physical contact, result in women losing natural expressions of affection, such as hugging. *“Women learn to hug each other, to keep their hands in their pockets,”* A. explained. After release, they struggle to reconnect with their emotions, as *“they are looking for the emotion they should express now to get out of their petrified state,”* mentioned A.

Another expert (D.) pointed out that even simple tasks, like using a phone or cutting fruits with a knife, may cause stress for some political prisoners because they simply have not used these items for several years. *“For example, a woman told me that while she was in a shelter, she went into the kitchen and took a knife to cut an apple, but she didn’t know what to do with it and ended up walking around the apartment with it,”* recalled D.

6.1.2 Political conditions and emigration

Five interlocutors highlighted emigration as an additional challenge for former political prisoners following their release. Not all former political prisoners can leave Belarus legally due to travel bans established because of a ‘List of terrorists’ or a ‘List of extremists,’ mentioned in the Context section.

Some resort to extreme measures to escape. One expert (D.) shared a harrowing example: *“We had a case when a woman in the third or fourth month of pregnancy with three minor children was forced to get out of Belarus not through the official border but through forests and swamps. In such a state, she walked three or four kilometers.”*

Resettling in a foreign country significantly complicates the process of reintegration. Finding housing, securing a new job, enrolling children in schools or kindergartens, accessing medical care, and adjusting to a country with a different language and culture is described by expert B. as *“a very big psychological ordeal, a difficulty.”*

Additionally, emigration often deepens the separation from relatives and friends who remain in Belarus, tearing apart important social connections. However, one expert (C.) noted that strong Belarusian communities exist in countries where many former political prisoners settle, allowing them to form new and meaningful relationships.

The main destinations for emigration are Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia. However, since 2022, Lithuania has reduced the issuance of humanitarian visas or political asylum to Belarusians, citing *“threats to national security”* due to Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Lithuanian authorities reportedly fear the infiltration of agents, according to the interlocutors (A., B.).

Even if former political prisoners obtain humanitarian visas to Poland, their life there is far from ideal. Expert G. noted: *“There are a lot of problems in Poland, and the Belarusian issue is not in focus there now. Even the Ukrainian issue is not already in focus, unfortunately.”*

“There are no permanent rehabilitation programs, free housing, established work position, or free language courses waiting for them there,” expert G. added. It gives a broad space for the civil society sector to implement its activities.

6.2. Consequences of politically-motivated imprisonment

6.2.1 Relationships

6.2.1.1. Motherhood

Five interviewees highlighted the disruption to relationships between women political prisoners and their children during imprisonment. Most identified this as the primary consequence they wanted to share with me. Their accounts align with earlier, albeit limited, studies, adding depth to existing research.

According to an interviewee A., *“children don't remember them [mothers], they don't know them, they don't understand [how to build relationships with them].”* Another (E.) noted that children often *“feel abandoned, there is resentment, anger,”* sometimes to the extent of ceasing to write letters to their mothers in detention. A third interviewee (B.) described that women former political prisoners suffer *“a huge, deep trauma of separation from their children. The woman realizes that the time she was unable to spend with her children was wasted, she had no opportunity to take part in the upbringing of her children.”*

These words suggest that, following their release from prison, political prisoners (and likely ordinary prisoners as well) face an additional challenge of reintegration — they must re-establish relationships with their children after a prolonged separation. It can be inferred that this situation exacerbates their feelings of guilt, both as mothers and as “keepers of the hearth” (a topic that will be explored further below), which confirms previous research about the consequences of political imprisonment for Belarusian women (Chulitskaya and Matonyte: 2024). This statement illustrates that, according to some interviewees' observations, despite the political nature of their imprisonment, women are often stigmatized after their release as being *‘bad mothers’* due to their absence.

Custody arrangements for children during their mother’s imprisonment typically fall to close relatives, such as fathers or grandparents, and sometimes adult siblings, through a *“multitude of bureaucratic procedures,”* according to interviewee D. If this fails, children are placed in residential care, which can cause deep trauma of rejection. The participant (D.) also mentioned that, in some cases, state authorities require political prisoners to repay the full cost of allowances paid to guardians after they are released and regain custody of their children. *“These can be gigantic amounts of money,”* D. noted, adding that court-ordered fines are often added to these repayments. At the same time, B. observed that women who are

mothers become “*a special object of manipulation and blackmail by the punitive system.*” Their children are used as a lever of pressure to force the political prisoner into compliance.

Interviewee F., based on her experience of working with political prisoners, shared that despite all the difficulties associated with the breakdown of the relationship between mother and child, for many women “*the welfare of children is the most important element, so after release, they prioritize addressing their children’s needs over their own*”. On the one hand, this helps them to pull themselves together, but on the other, it “*leads to a refocusing*” in their lives, as F. noted. The social role of women as mothers, along with the responsibility of caring for their children, instills in political prisoners, upon their release, a strong desire to restore their lives to the level they were at, insofar as this is possible. In other words, as MacKinnon (2019) observed in her study of the experiences of GULAG prisoners with children, the presence of these children served as a significant motivation for prisoners to survive.

6.2.1.2. Partners and relatives

Six interviewees observed that, in their experience, most women political prisoners end their romantic relationships either during their imprisonment or after their release. Interviewee A. noted that for relationships to survive, “*the partner has to do a lot of work on themselves, taking on the responsibility for the other,*” which is rare and requires “*a great deal of moral, physical, and material strength, resources, and means—especially if the sentence isn’t just six months to a year, but extends to five, ten, or even fifteen years,*” as pointed out another expert (D.)

From his experience working with political prisoners, one interlocutor (F.) remarked, “*The longer the sentence, the more likely it is that the family will break up,*” which demonstrates the similarities between Belarussian political prisoners and political prisoners from South Africa and Northern Ireland. The family breakdown may happen for several reasons. For instance, if a man starts a new relationship while their partner or wife is imprisoned and deliberately isolated from getting letters or meeting beloved one. Moreover, it may happen if a man is not capable enough to deal with the length of his partner’s sentence or overall stress. It increases the feeling of betrayal and makes a woman more vulnerable.

“*If there are children in the family, their trauma is compounded by the family breakdown, on top of the fact that both parents are traumatized—the mother by imprisonment and the father by his own traumas,*” interviewee B. explained.

Two experts (C. and D.) also noted Belarus’s high national divorce rate. According to Supreme Court Judge Vera Krugova⁴⁹, over 55% of registered marriages in Belarus end in

⁴⁹ Konoplev A. (2024). ‘In Belarus, 55% of marriages end in divorce. The main reason is differing views on life’, <https://1prof.by/news/v-strane/v-belarusi-raspadaetsya-55-brakov-glavnaya-prichina-raznye-vzglyady-na-zhizn/>, consulted on 03.10.24.

divorce annually as of 2024. One expert (C.) emphasized that the likelihood of divorce doubles for families in which one spouse has been a political prisoner.

Regarding relationships with family, half of the interviewees noted that women political prisoners generally manage to maintain ties with relatives after their release, particularly with their mothers, demonstrating the aforementioned traditional role of mothers in families. This view was echoed by interlocutor F.: *“Only a very small percentage of former political prisoners experience total rejection from their families, where communication ceases completely because of their imprisonment.”*

However, there are exceptions. *“Some individuals who left Belarus told us that their parents didn’t support them but attended court sessions. Moreover, parents might believe that the political prisoners deserved their fate, yet still brought parcels to the prisons,”* expert C. noted. One could deduce that it may be related to the internal fear of repression or social pressure and condemnation.

In summary, expert D. observed, *“If a person is in prison, their family, in a way, is imprisoned too.”*

6.2.1.3. Other prisoners

Six interlocutors highlighted the relationships that developed between political prisoners and other Belarusian inmates in the colonies. *“These relationships are based on normal human care, where individuals feel responsible for each other,”* explained expert A. *“If mutual support groups are formed within the colony, these bonds often extend beyond imprisonment,”* thinks respondent F.

However, according to expert B., *“many women political prisoners avoid socializing with others in similar situations to steer clear of provocations from the administration.”* Instead, they engage with non-political prisoners as a form of self-preservation.

People support one another after release, responding to requests for help from those still inside the colony. Additionally, women who leave the colony can share information about the conditions of specific political prisoners, enabling their relatives or human rights activists to stay informed about their health and living conditions.

It can be assumed that political prisoners perceive themselves as belonging to a distinct group that understands the unique challenges and difficulties associated with resettlement after leaving prison and emigrating. As a result, communication with individuals from this community may feel more comfortable and reassuring. Employees of the civil sector leverage the connections established during detention to organize support initiatives following prisoners' release, thereby facilitating the acquisition of additional knowledge about potential sources of support for former political prisoners during their resettlement process.

At the same time, many experts discussed the prevalence of whistleblowing in Belarusian colonies. In such a situation, some prisoners start denouncing others in the hope of receiving

small benefits in the conditions of detention for cooperating with the administration. According to other experts (A., B., D.), this practice is particularly common in women's colonies, where *"women are less supported,"* leading to a loss of basic trust and security among prisoners.

The repercussions of whistleblowing extend beyond the colonies. After release, groups of women who cooperated with the administration and those who refused often find themselves in the same spaces, such as events or rehabilitation programs. From these words, it is clear that this situation complicates the resettlement process because many Belarusian political prisoners live in one country (for instance, Poland).

"It is not clear how they then get along in the same society," expert G. remarked. G. added, *"It's difficult for them. I understand both one and the other group, but I don't think it's being worked through. There is still no consensus in society whether those who denounce others should be forgiven."* When I asked this interviewee about the reconciliation policy of civil society applicable to this challenge, they told me that it is not even a question in their agenda because there are so many problems they need to concentrate on.

6.2.2 Health

Most experts reported that female political prisoners experience numerous health issues after their release from the colonies. One expert (A.) explained that *"in a colony, you are constantly under tension. And the production of cortisol has a very strong effect on the thyroid gland and the menstrual cycle."* Besides, one could assume that the aforementioned prison conditions play a huge role in developing health problems among political prisoners.

Some of the health issues experienced by Belarusian political prisoners (such as depression and other mental health problems, as well as gynecological and reproductive system disorders), as identified by experts, are common among political prisoners more broadly, as observed in the literature review section.

However, the analysis of interview data reveals that certain health problems were not highlighted in previous research. On the one hand, this may be due to the difficulty of scientifically establishing a direct link between imprisonment and certain health issues. For instance, gastrointestinal problems, dental issues, vision impairments, dermatological conditions, and genitourinary system disorders, significant weight or hair loss were not commonly discussed. On the other hand, researchers might not pay attention to these health issues of former political prisoners.

At the same time, some respondents noted that many of the health problems faced by female political prisoners are similar to those experienced by their male counterparts imprisoned for political reasons. The exception is health conditions related to the unique aspects of the female anatomy.

6.2.2.1. Self-harm and suicide attempts

Seven expert interviewees mentioned that some former female political prisoners either attempt or contemplate suicide or resort to self-harm after their release.

Interviewee A. described this as a *“frequent practice and frequent thought”* among the women she works with. Expert C. recounted that, in his practice, three young women *“who were put into custody at ages 18–19”* attempted suicide, although these attempts were not meticulously planned. It is reasonable to assume that this may be due to the severe trauma experienced by former female political prisoners, as well as the stress associated with emigration, the necessity of making decisions independently, and the challenge of rebuilding relationships with their relatives.

Expert B. stated that, in their experience, women had not attempted suicide, though men had. However, B. acknowledged that their organization primarily works with men, as the majority of political prisoners in Belarus are male.

Another civil sector worker (E.) observed that suicide attempts are *“not a very frequent practice,”* but when they do occur, it is often some time after release and triggered by re-traumatization. *“For example, a woman decides to stay in Belarus, and after six months or a year later, she might be detained again for just 24 hours [in a temporary detention center]. When she releases, overwhelmed and in complete confusion, she may harm herself,”* E. explained.

Another expert (F.) noted that self-harm (including deliberately neglected treatment for a serious illness) was more common among women, while suicidal thoughts occurred more frequently among men. *“From my observations, after everything they’ve been through, women often don’t seem to have the desire to kill themselves,”* F. said. This may also be because women feel the need to take responsibility for their children and shed the label of ‘bad mother.’ Additionally, women may be more inclined to seek help from a psychologist, as some of the interviewees also mentioned.

6.2.2.2. Alcohol and other psychoactive drugs

Regarding alcohol or other drug use, six experts noted that political prisoners they work with might turn to these substances after their release. This confirms the research done by McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath (2004) on political prisoners from Northern Ireland.

However, experts generally agree that women do not typically develop long-term alcohol or drug dependency. Instead, as one interlocutor (E.) observed, it is *“a transitional phase that lasts for a while,”* maybe also to reduce stress and relax. He also pointed out that nicotine addiction is more commonly seen, as some political prisoners take up smoking after their release.

Most experts also indicated that, in their experience, the use of psychoactive substances (including alcohol) is more frequently reported among male political prisoners. However,

they acknowledged that this may be due to the fact that there are significantly more male political prisoners in Belarus than female.

6.2.3 Social life

6.2.3.1. Occupation

Seven interviewees reported that Belarusian political prisoners, both women and men, face significant challenges in returning to their previous jobs after release. The same conclusion was presented by McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath (2004) about Northern Ireland political prisoners.

Interlocutor A. stated that *“in 99.9 percent of cases, it is impossible.”* Another (B.) remarked, *“None of the women have returned to their profession, whether they are inside or outside the country (Belarus. — N.K.).”* This situation deteriorates when a person faces leaving Belarus after being released. Expert A. shared an example: *“There are women who were excellent teachers, but after imprisonment, they ended up working in sewing factories for pennies because that’s the only skill they learned in the colony.”*

Another interviewee, G. added that political prisoners often have to accept jobs that pay less and require lower qualifications.

Experts explained that inclusion on terrorist and/or extremist lists, as well as the general stigma associated with having served a sentence under politically motivated charges post-2020, makes finding a job in Belarus nearly impossible. This is exacerbated by a government-mandated questionnaire for employers, which displays information about applicants in a national database. According to interlocutors, there is an unwritten policy at the state level to prevent the hiring of former political prisoners⁵⁰. Business owners who defy this can face repercussions. One interviewee (B.) described the situation: *“There is a beacon on the person wherever he comes. The system itself takes revenge on him even after his release.”*

Some women who ran businesses in Belarus before imprisonment may attempt to restart their ventures in exile, according to another expert (D.) He said it became possible due to the strong support of former female political prisoners' communities, whose members motivated people to begin running their businesses (for example, backing pastries). This example illustrates the meaning of connections that were formed in custody among political prisoners and maintaining them at large.

An expert from the civil sector (B.) suggested alternative paths for former political prisoners, such as working for international companies or retraining in fields where freelancing is an option. These include *“SMM, targeted advertising, IT courses, web design, and similar*

⁵⁰Ivashenko V. (2024). ‘Is it impossible for a former political prisoner to find work in Belarus?’, <https://www.dw.com/ru/byvsij-politzaklucennyj-snacala-ugrozali-zabrat-detej-a-potom-uvolili-direktora-zavoda-kotoryj-vzal-mena-iz-zalosti/a-68605720>, consulted on 08.10.24.

professions,” they pointed out. However, these fields are very competitive, and the success of obtaining a good job there from scratch is not guaranteed, which complicates the process of resettlement.

6.2.3.2. Language

This aspect has not been explored by scholars of political prisoners before, but I believed it was important to include it in my thesis.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Belarus, the country has two official languages: Belarusian and Russian. However, activists and human rights defenders report⁵¹ that individuals who use Belarusian as their primary language may face discrimination or violence. Most experts noted that after the mass protests of 2020 and the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, there was a general increase in the use of Belarusian in the country.

Among political prisoners, however, no single trend emerged: some predominantly speak Belarusian, others Russian, and some use both equally. One expert (C.) remarked that when some former political prisoners contact his organization, they might initially write in Russian, but when they receive a reply in Belarusian, they promptly switch to it as well.

One interlocutor (B.) observed that some protesters came from Belarusian-speaking families, where the language was intrinsic to their identity. For them, *“it did not become a tool of resistance to the regime; it was simply how they have always lived.”* So even if political prisoners were punished and bullied for using the Belarusian language in the colony, after their release, they continue to speak it, as it remains an integral part of their lives.

On the other hand, some political prisoners switched from Russian to Belarusian after their release as a gesture of solidarity with those persecuted or tortured for using Belarusian in the colony⁵². *“I definitely didn’t see people who were Belaruskomovnye (Belarusian-speaking. - N.K.) but after release started speaking Russian. I think they may avoid [using Belarusian] temporarily in the colony to survive,”* the expert B. explained.

Another interlocutor (E.) noted, *“In everyday life, they probably use Russian most often. However, many women former political prisoners choose exclusively Belarusian when they give interviews or post on social networks.”* It not only demonstrates opposition to the regime but also emphasizes their ethnic identity and serves to distinguish them from Russians, which is especially important for some, particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

⁵¹ Perunovskaya A. (2021). ‘How discrimination based on the Belarusian language occurs in Belarus’, <https://www.dw.com/ru/hamstvo-i-izbienija-v-belarusi-diskriminirujut-iz-za-belorusskogo-jazyka/a-56776898>, consulted on 06.10.24.

⁵² Spring96 website. (2024). ‘Language as protest.’ How the Belarusian language (does not) survive in detention’, <https://spring96.org/ru/news/114482>, consulted on 06.10.24.

6.2.3.3. Civil position

Seven of my interviewees shared their observations on whether former political prisoners change their political views and their willingness to stay engaged with developments in the country.

One interviewee (A.) noted that many women experience “*disillusionment with democratic forces, but they are willing to invest in efforts to accelerate the process of releasing detainees through humanitarian negotiations or lifting sanctions [on Lukashenka's regime. - N.K.]*.” Another (D.) observed that some women hold firmly to their principles and refuse to compromise, while others disengage entirely, avoiding the news and withdrawing from current events. D. added that they do not have precise statistics on how many women adopt each approach.

Being informationally and socially isolated in prison, many political prisoners, upon their release, do not fully grasp the current processes in Belarusian society and continue to live with the perceptions they formed before their imprisonment. A similar experience was reported by political prisoners in Northern Ireland. As McEvoy, Shirlow, and McElrath (2004) noted, when released from prison, individuals struggled to understand the behavior of young people and the new social norms.

Another expert (E.) explained that for some former prisoners, “*any activism or political movement is a trigger that deeply hurts them, makes them angry, and leads them to say they will never go back to it.*” In contrast, other women, after securing their safety upon release, begin giving media interviews and actively participate in educational activities, viewing it as their ‘*mission,*’ which confirms the findings of Chulitskaya and Matonyte (2024). Perhaps this is what helps former political prisoners navigate the resettlement process more easily, providing them with an inner confidence that, despite all the difficulties, their life continues and they can still find a place within it.

6.2.3.4. Femininity

Four experts noted that women often strive to “*regain their femininity*” after political imprisonment. This may be because, according to Expert G., women in Belarusian colonies are treated the same as men, with little regard for their psychological or physiological needs. He noted that this “*greatly affects their perception of themselves.*” Upon gaining their freedom, women seek to reclaim what distinguishes them from men and often do so through various self-care practices.

According to one Belarusian civil sector employee (A.), this becomes a significant priority for former prisoners. Women buy creams, perfumes, and new clothes and make appointments with beauticians or for manicures. “*One woman wrote to me just yesterday. She said the first thing she did after her release was buy beautiful things. The prison’s pink dress, which prisoners are forced to wear daily, seems to stick to a person—it erases their personality,*” the interviewee (A.) shared.

Another expert (B.) observed that many women visibly age while in prison. Although some attempt supportive facial exercises or sports (if allowed), these measures often have limited effect, particularly for women imprisoned during menopause, when the absence of proper medication accelerates aging dramatically. *“Recently, a female political prisoner who has been free for a year and a half told me she wanted to depilate, and it’s important to want to do it—not just do it out of habit,”* the expert B. recounted.

A third interviewee (E.) remarked that *“women try not to lose their sense of beauty or their connection to their bodies.”* Even in detention, they make efforts to care for themselves as much as possible. *“Beauty treatments become a source of immense happiness and relief. They realize it’s over, and they can allow themselves this again,”* the expert (E.) explained.

6.3. Civil society activities in the resettlement of former political prisoners

6.3.1 Programmes

Based on interviews with experts, 26 programs have been identified to assist Belarusian political prisoners, both those still imprisoned and those who are free. The full list of them is provided in the Appendix section. Some programs are only available to political prisoners who have left Belarus, as certain organizations have been labeled 'extremist' by the Belarusian government. Receiving assistance from these groups could lead to re-imprisonment or other penalties.

In general, civil society representatives develop programs that address the difficulties faced by political prisoners upon their release, as well as their specific needs. Experts have noted that these organizations can provide medical assistance, including help with locating and paying for healthcare services, and psychological support, such as finding and covering the costs of psychotherapy. To alleviate the financial burden on families, civil society initiatives may also cover the cost of prison parcels, utility bills, fines, and help find and pay for legal representation.

Challenges related to emigration are also considered. Experts offer guidance on how political prisoners can relocate abroad and assist them in obtaining the necessary documentation to legalize their stay outside Belarus. There are also programs focused on helping them secure employment abroad and learn foreign languages. After their release, political prisoners can also receive direct financial assistance, which may be used to purchase groceries or cover initial expenses.

Additionally, experts mentioned that political prisoners may receive financial aid to cover child-related expenses, such as transportation to school or buying New Year gifts. If a woman approaches the organization seeking assistance for her child, such as help with childcare (e.g., finding a nanny or covering extracurricular activities), her request is generally granted.

Recognizing that emigration often leads to the loss of connections and that navigating alone can be particularly challenging, some organizations focus on fostering a sense of community

abroad. Experts informed me about the existence of women’s clubs offering various activities, which are highly popular among former female political prisoners. These clubs provide women opportunities to attend leadership lectures, participate in creative workshops, and engage in discussions about personal appearance, which helps them regain a sense of femininity. The women also gather for cultural events, such as concerts, parties, and city tours, or participate in massage sessions to relieve emotional tension.

Moreover, there are initiatives where former political prisoners and emigrated Belarusians write letters to those still imprisoned, as there are over 1,000 political prisoners in the country. Some programs are also focused on raising awareness of repression through media coverage, ensuring that the issue of political prisoners remains on the public agenda.

Experts noted that there is no limit to the number of former political prisoners who can receive support, but applicants must apply personally. In emergencies—such as life-threatening situations—a representative can contact the organization on behalf of the individual, and support will also be provided.

Before accepting an individual into a program, the organization usually verifies their background. For instance, expert H. explained that their organization verifies whether individuals or their families are genuinely in need by checking their food purchases. *“People in real need won’t buy three 2-liter bottles of cola or a bottle of Red Label; they’ll buy canned goods or other nutritious, long-lasting products,”* H. noted.

For expert C. there is another approach. The primary criterion is recognition as a political prisoner, either after or before serving time, they said. The organization does not consider behavior during imprisonment, acknowledging the extreme circumstances in custody. From these words, I realize that this organization may assist a person even if they were an informer of a prison administration and collected data about other political prisoners. Expert C. also revealed that even individuals with serious criminal histories, such as convicted murderers or pedophiles, have been supported if they were recognized as political prisoners. However, they shared that three male former prisoners were refused assistance due to threatening the team with violence.

The duration of support varies: some initiatives last from two weeks to three months, while others are longer. Some former prisoners seek help immediately upon release, while others wait a year or more. However, certain types of support, like temporary accommodation in a shelter, may not be available immediately due to limited capacity. However, in one case, an expert (H.) remarked, *“We don’t want to give people endless hope. Our goal is to provide a starting point, not permanent dependence.”*

Some experts emphasized that the projects aim to provide a foundation for former prisoners to regain stability and move forward independently. While those in extreme financial or psychological need are not ignored, there is an expectation that recipients actively engage in their own recovery — whether by attending psychotherapy or seeking employment.

From the interviews, I believe that Belarusian civil society organizations, except one that focuses solely on female political prisoners, do not specifically develop gender-oriented programs despite recognizing the unique challenges faced by former female political prisoners. However, such initiatives may arise organically and are typically carried out at the women's request (such as the women's clubs described earlier or assistance with childcare).

As the experts explained, introducing specifically gender-oriented programs is not yet feasible for several reasons. One of the main challenges is the lack of knowledge on how to rehabilitate former female political prisoners, which stems from insufficient consideration of global experiences, as highlighted in the literature review section of this thesis. Moreover, as the interviewees pointed out, Belarus did not have rehabilitation or resettlement programs for former prisoners until 2020. Therefore, civil society organizations have had to establish this work from scratch and develop many protocols over the past five years. While they may have learned from the experience of their colleagues who did not deal with sensitive political topics in Belarus, this aspect was not discussed in the interviews.

Additionally, the experts unanimously noted that the majority of political prisoners are men, and a large portion of the limited financial resources is allocated to assisting them. Developing specialized programs would require hiring additional staff, which is not feasible given budget constraints.

In general, when I inquired about the possibility of introducing gender-specific programs, I sensed some perplexity among the respondents, as their organizations do not even classify political prisoners by gender internally. This is because they may not have considered it important. As respondent B. remarked, *“We live in a society of “white male values,” which has made women invisible and vulnerable.”* Other reasons provided by the experts included their organization’s ability to meet the needs of all former political prisoners, regardless of gender, and the fact that some problems—such as difficulties in finding a new job or health issues—are common to both male and female political prisoners.

Only one of the seven experts (G.) mentioned their organization has an internal gender-based categorization of political prisoners. This approach is part of a program designed for mentor-ex-prisoner interactions. *“Both the mentor and the ex-prisoner undergo an interview with a psychologist, who assesses whether the ex-prisoner would feel more comfortable working with a woman or a man. We make a conscious effort to match individuals by gender as carefully as possible,”* the expert (G.) explained.

Despite this, most of the experts I interviewed acknowledged the importance and potential usefulness of gender-specific programs. However, they noted that such programs are constrained by the factors mentioned earlier. *“We are sensitive to all these needs and consider them, recognizing that there are different risk groups. If we have enough resources to provide specialized care, we will do everything,”* one expert (D.) stated.

6.3.2 Cooperation with Other Experts

Five interviewees mentioned that they collaborate with experts from various fields to understand the experiences of former political prisoners better. These collaborations include psychologists who work with political prisoners from other countries and with former war veterans, political prisoners themselves from other countries, or the staff of international organizations that assist them, as well as employees of organizations supporting women released from prison or recovering addicts.

According to an expert who worked with a psychologist whose clients are former political prisoners (A.), *“the traumatic experience of former political prisoners is similar to the experience of women who have survived a rape.”* A. added, *“A person develops such a deep hole inside that they can't plug it with anything. They are not helped by retreats, or holidays, or beauty treatments; they can't remember any of it.”* The interlocutor explained that this happens because *“no one was held accountable for the violence, and it was decided for the person how he would live his life; he was psychologically destroyed.”* This connection helps develop programs for former political prisoners and provides a deeper understanding of their experiences after release, which is crucial given the limited knowledge in this area.

Another expert (B.) shared the insights from a discussion with a former political prisoner about resettlement. *“I asked him to share his formula for success—how he managed to build and successfully run a business, keep in touch with his two families, do scientific research, and, in general, become a successful person. He told me that although he got out of prison 30 years ago, he still dreams at night about the cell he spent six years in,”* B. said. From this, this expert concluded that political prisoners may need comprehensive psychological care for the rest of their lives.

Another expert (G.) mentioned a survey conducted by a Belarusian NGO that examined the perspectives of political prisoners and their families. The survey revealed that 80–90% of men in prison claimed they did not need psychological help. However, in 100% of cases, their relatives and close friends (mostly mothers and wives) strongly believed that released political prisoners needed to work with a psychologist.

6.3.3 Criticism of colleagues

When analyzing the data, I noticed that four experts criticized the work of their colleagues from other organizations. The most pressing issue was how political prisoners should be released. This discussion is actively observed in the Belarusian segment of social networks, as well as in independent media outlets.

While one segment of Belarusian society supports humanitarian negotiations with Lukashenka's regime to secure the release of all political prisoners, another group believes it is necessary to use political tools guided by *“human rights and humanitarian principles”* (expert B.) to influence the current regime.

Interlocutor (A.) noted that publicly promoting the idea that pardoning political prisoners is meaningless only deepens their trauma. This makes them feel as though nobody cares about

them. From her perspective, Belarusian political prisoners and their families have endured such stress and trauma over the past five years that their health and mental well-being are deteriorating day by day. This expert emphasizes that behind each abstract figure on the list of political prisoners is a real person, and reducing this list essentially means saving a life.

They (B.) argued that while the position of those advocating for “*release at any cost*” is understandable—particularly for former political prisoners who endured years of imprisonment without being rescued—“*they should not justify themselves in their weakness.*”

“*If a person has been broken, of course, he will side with 'liberation at any cost,' but not because he understands what these processes look like, but because he feels that this position is more understandable to him. This is manipulation,*” said expert B. They claimed that civil society should not broadcast the idea that applying a pardon, giving a complimentary interview for propagandist Belarusian media, as well as kneeling before Lukashenka is the norm.

Several experts also criticized the psychological approaches used by some colleagues to support political prisoners. “*Basically, we have Gestalt therapy, but it's not suitable for people who have been in a violent environment. Let's say they come to a specialist, and he tells them, 'When you're anxious, imagine you're floating in the sea.' What is the ***** sea?*” one interlocutor (A.) exclaimed indignantly. An interviewee from the Belarusian civil society sector (B.) also criticized the use of drug therapy, arguing that, in some cases, it has a negative impact on individuals.

Expert B. explicitly described their relationships with some colleagues as ‘conflictual’ and admitted that they do not communicate with certain representatives of democratic forces. In her opinion, it worsens the relationship between the third sector and former political prisoners. “*That's why I say we don't know how to work; we externally still layer this trauma on the person,*” B. said. Another expert (C.) shared that attempts to create associations of political prisoners had failed due to constant disagreements within the community.

Two experts specifically criticized the way some colleagues communicate with former political prisoners. “*Not everyone fully understands how carefully these people should be treated. Sometimes, in wanting to convey our own position, we adopt a toxic form of interaction. Instead of helping people, we traumatize them more,*” B. said. Expert D. added that some political prisoners are reluctant to seek help from NGOs because they have experienced neglect of their problems or general frustration in communication with civil society representatives.

6.3.4 Plans and Suggestions

Despite limited resources, civil society representatives expressed plans to expand existing programs specifically addressing women's needs.

Among the proposals was the development of a dedicated support program for women, focusing on their specific challenges in finding jobs and rebuilding relationships with children and family; the creation of a psychological support program aimed at helping women take care of themselves and restore their health after release from political persecution; and the expansion of the ‘Women in Tech’ program. One expert noted that they would like to see the introduction of gender quotas in some activities.

Other suggestions included increasing community activities, such as organizing film clubs or networking events. Experts also emphasized the importance of developing protocols for individualized assistance that takes into account gender and other personal characteristics, as well as researching the psychological state of political prisoners post-release to help NGOs work more effectively with this group. These intentions suggest that the experts, at least verbally, recognize what can be done to assist former political prisoners more effectively during their resettlement.

The experts also shared their thoughts on measures they believe could help former political prisoners or the organizations supporting them to resocialize more quickly and effectively.

Given the lack of support from the authorities in the host countries, the experts suggested the introduction of national-level resettlement programs in countries where Belarusian political prisoners most frequently emigrate, as well as the creation of a permanent social service dedicated to helping political prisoners adapt after their release, including assistance with legalization and job searches. Additionally, they emphasized the need for high-quality media products in the Belarusian language to encourage people to speak more Belarusian, thereby strengthening and preserving their ethnic and cultural identity in emigration.

Recognizing that some former political prisoners refuse to engage with the news or participate in Belarusian political life, Expert B. stated, *"The task of civil society is to preserve human capital in the form of Belarusian activists and creative individuals."* Expert G. also acknowledged that insufficient attention is paid to the issues faced by political prisoners after their release, adding that the media and researchers should prioritize this topic.

These suggestions represent general reflections and should not be interpreted as concrete plans by the organizations themselves.

6.4. Civil society representatives as contributory experts

6.4.1. Civil society representatives’ own experiences

In describing the condition of political prisoners after their release, some experts highlighted how personal life experiences have helped them better understand these individuals' behaviors, needs, and challenges. For instance, expert A. recounted his traumatic relationship with a person who *"always blamed them for everything,"* in an environment of *"endless violence."* A. explained, *"The nature of violence is that you're constantly being held in limbo. And these women have exactly the same condition."*

Another expert (B.) shared the story of her ‘close mate,’ a former political prisoner who began “*drinking alcohol quite often*” after emigrating. B. stated, “*My task was to introduce a therapist into her life to replace alcohol. I succeeded, but it's scary to think what happens to people we can't reach.*” These situations prompt third-sector staff to pay attention to issues they may not have considered before.

This same interviewee also had personal experience with protests, including serving administrative penalties and volunteering at an isolation center in Minsk, where prisoners frequently reported torture. Drawing from their experiences, they discussed various challenges faced by former political prisoners, such as the use of the Belarusian language, the reluctance of pro-democracy small business owners to hire them, and the aging effects of imprisonment on women. They also described how they coped with their own incarceration, saying, “*I used to do exercises with my fellow inmates to preserve myself in those conditions. After my release, the first thing I wanted to do was cut off my hair to psychologically get something off my back.*”

Another expert (D.) observed that their friends became “*insanely religious*” after imprisonment. Reflecting on this, they noted, “*If a person is imprisoned for one or two years, they are less likely to become strongly religious, and it's easier for them to survive. The longer the term, the harder it is to survive, the harder it is to hold on.*” This quote highlights that in a situation of prolonged stress and a lack of clear hope for a happy future, people may turn to religion for support and begin to believe in God, even if this was not previously observed in their lives.

Interviewee D. also described one acquaintance who, after two and a half years in prison, is now in exile in Poland and struggles to discuss everyday topics. “*We met her at a concert, but her memories keep bringing her back to prison because she experienced a lot of stress there. Now, when we talk, her tears start flowing. It's tough for her. She doesn't want to work; most of her life is gone, and she automatically fixates on what she experienced,*” the expert D. shared, illustrating the deep trauma from the imprisonment of this person.

Explaining how former political prisoners maintain relationships with their families, one expert (F.) drew parallels to their own experience “*documenting war situations,*” highlighting how separation and differing life contexts complicate these relationships, which may lead to divorce or separation, mentioned above.

Another expert (G.) spoke of a friend currently serving a sentence in a Belarusian colony. To show solidarity, G. wears a T-shirt in support of his friend at events. The expert remarked that people who knew their friend often approach them, allowing them to understand better detention conditions and the ongoing experiences of their friend. Furthermore, G. observed that former political prisoners often seek connections with others who share their prison experiences, and they value opportunities for joint activities — “*even the negative emotions could unite people when they are shared collectively*”.

An additional perspective came from an expert who reflected on Belarusian society's readiness for change (B.), stating that the country has a long way to go *“to democratize, to achieve the real equality.”* The expert shared, *“I am a human rights activist and a heterosexual person. When I advocate for equality for LGBT people, I receive strong and mighty insults.”*

Another expert (D.) acknowledged the collective trauma within Belarusian civil society, admitting, *“We are ourselves traumatized and work with traumatized people. We face persecution, we are in emigration, and we bear the trauma of witnessing repression, as well as the personal traumas of those we work with.”*

In this way, the personal experiences of these experts not only deepen their understanding of the individuals they assist but also help them articulate the broader challenges faced by former political prisoners and the society that surrounds them.

6.4.2. Civil society representatives' knowledge in other spheres

Although none of the experts are professional psychologists, they are familiar with psychological terms and concepts and frequently use them to explain how they believe political prisoners feel after release. For instance, they compared these individuals to people in long-term relationships with someone exhibiting narcissistic personality disorder or victims of domestic violence. The experts also find similarities between former political prisoners and children raised in a destructive family or individuals who have experienced hostilities or combat.

Experts note that former political prisoners often exhibit symptoms similar to PTSD, a finding supported by literature on the effects of political imprisonment in regions such as Northern Ireland, Palestine, and the former GDR.

Additionally, the interviewees referenced psychological terms such as 'deferred life syndrome' and 'post-prison disorder,' which highlight that the experiences of political prisoners can be understood through the lens of complex psycho-emotional states that arise after prolonged traumatic experiences. For instance, the term 'deferred life syndrome' can help explain why former prisoners, once released, struggle to re-establish a normal life. While incarcerated, they were compelled to postpone many important aspects of their existence.

Another term the experts used was 'trauma layering.' In the context of political prisoners, this can be understood as a multi-layered impact, where the trauma of initial political repression is compounded by further psychological consequences following release, such as the challenges of emigration, changes in occupation, or separation from their families.

In addition to the factors outlined in other sections, the experts drew on insights from sociology, gender studies, and cultural studies to suggest what might hinder the resettlement of former political prisoners.

One expert (B.) explained how societal expectations rooted in Soviet-era models exacerbate the challenges faced by women. *“In the Soviet Union, the family was a unit of society where the woman was responsible for stability; she was the keeper of the family hearth. Women aren’t accustomed to sharing their struggles outwardly—they strive to appear strong, to show they’ve coped with everything, even though they were considered weak. These stereotypes are imposed by society, not chosen by women. If this weren’t the case, perhaps we would better understand what happens to these individuals, regardless of their gender,”* B. noted.

According to them, such stereotypes foster distrust in others and make it more difficult for individuals to seek help, including psychological support. This may also hinder the successful and timely resettlement process for political prisoners. It is confirmed by this expert’s following explanation. The interviewee (B.) said this Soviet model has left Belarus without a culture of accepting psychological help, causing that *“people sometimes think that going to a psychologist is a sign of weakness or foolishness.”*

However, F. felt that Belarusian women, who were imprisoned for political reasons, are more willing to express their emotions, share their concerns, and ask for psychological assistance, saying, *“It’s more accepted that way.”* This aspect was also mentioned by four other experts. By contrast, F. noted, *“Men face greater pressure in this situation. The mindset is that boys or men don’t cry. And then, well, a stroke at 40 or a noose.”*

Another expert (F.) linked the *“traditionalist approach”* still prevalent in Belarus to the burdens placed on women political prisoners upon their release. F. observed that women are often forced to take care of their families and elderly relatives, even when they themselves need help and support. Expert G. also remarked that women in prison become more acutely aware of the *“patriarchal nature of Belarusian society and upbringing”*. One can deduce that is the reason why after the release, women may first concentrate on their children’s needs rather than their own.

Another expert (H.) spoke about the so-called *“Belarusian mentality”* and its impact on social assistance. H. explained the difference he sees between those who receive charitable aid in Western countries and in the former USSR. *“In Western societies, businesses aim for long-term relationships. They’re willing to take risks to gain loyal clients who can contribute over time, allowing them to plan their activities. In Belarus, however, the system operates differently. For instance, people try to fool a man because he might know nothing or to be seen as inexperienced. If you are a loser, you might return, but if not, someone else, a loser as well, will take your place. This mindset has been ingrained over generations at every level and extends to social assistance,”* the expert said, explaining that some people who received assistance from the organization attempted to cheat the system.

7. Conclusion

The data obtained from the interviews for this study indicate that, despite differences in political regimes and the nature of conflicts, Belarusian political prisoners share several similarities with political prisoners from other countries and regions, particularly Palestine, South Africa, Northern Ireland, and the former GDR. Among the key similarities identified—highlighted by civil society representatives who work closely with this group—are high divorce rates, severe psychological difficulties, job loss and economic hardship, and challenges in reintegration due to information isolation and a lack of understanding of contemporary political and social developments.

It remains difficult to determine whether Belarusian political prisoners experience PTSD and related psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety, as their symptoms have not been systematically studied by psychologists and psychiatrists, unlike in research conducted on political prisoners in Northern Ireland, Palestine, and the former GDR. However, the testimonies of civil society representatives suggest the presence of these serious symptoms, which may significantly hinder the resettlement process.

Both male and former female political prisoners in Belarus, like those in Northern Ireland, may turn to alcohol abuse after release. Experts have also observed instances of self-harm and suicide attempts—issues that have not been widely documented in the existing literature. Additionally, severe health problems are prevalent among political prisoners of both genders, as has been reported in studies on former prisoners in Northern Ireland and South Africa.

Further parallels emerge when comparing civil society initiatives supporting former political prisoners in Belarus and Northern Ireland. In both contexts, organizations focus on community-building activities as well as assistance for families.

Regarding the gendered experience of political imprisonment, Belarusian women, much like their Northern Irish counterparts, often struggle with intense feelings of guilt toward their children after release. Given the patriarchal nature of Belarusian society, many female political prisoners internalize the notion that they are ‘bad mothers,’ even though their imprisonment was beyond their control. This sense of guilt may be exacerbated by prison administrations, as penitentiary staff reportedly manipulate children to undermine the mothers. Additionally, Belarusian women have faced gender-specific pressure in prison related to their physiological characteristics, which has led many to seek to reclaim their femininity after release—an experience also documented in research on Northern Irish female political prisoners.

A key distinction in the resettlement process for Belarusian political prisoners is that many are forced to undergo it in exile, significantly complicating their reintegration. Those who remain in Belarus face additional risks, as receiving assistance from organizations designated as ‘extremist’ by the authorities can result in further persecution. Consequently, many former political prisoners in Belarus are forced to forgo participation in essential support programs

or maintain a ‘normal life,’ because they may be included in the ‘List of terrorists,’ or the ‘List of extremists.’

Moreover, as experts explained, since there were no state programs for the assistance and re-socialization of prisoners in general in Belarus until 2020, they often have to act intuitively under extremely challenging conditions, relying on personal experience, interdisciplinary knowledge (e.g., psychology and sociology), and communication with other experts. On the one hand, this inevitably increases the potential for civil society representatives to make mistakes. On the other, representatives of Belarusian civil society serve as contributory experts in the field of resettlement of political prisoners because they produce new knowledge on how to assist this group of people.

Not all civil society representatives share the same views on the steps needed for the release and rehabilitation of political prisoners. Consequently, some interviews were critical of their colleagues’ approaches. Most organizations, with the exception of one, provide assistance to both male and female political prisoners during their incarceration and after their release. While many interlocutors acknowledged that women former political prisoners may have unique needs upon release—stemming from both physiological differences and the stereotypical gender roles entrenched in Belarusian society—limited financial resources, the lack of knowledge in gender studies, and the high demand for assistance from male prisoners often prevent the implementation of separate, women-specific programs.

However, organizations strive to address the individual needs of each woman by offering psychological and medical support and, for example, paying for childcare services like nannies or allocating money for related expenses. Thus, even though most organizations do not have dedicated programs for women, they still attempt to accommodate their specific needs.

This paper may serve as a valuable resource for NGO representatives working with political prisoners by outlining the programs used by Belarusian civil society organizations to aid in their re-socialization. It also highlights the often-overlooked gender dimension of the issue, promoting more inclusive support that addresses not only the unique challenges faced by women due to their imprisonment but also broader issues such as gender inequality and entrenched societal roles.

Furthermore, this work underscores the fact that the challenges faced by political prisoners do not end upon their release. Researchers, media professionals, civil society workers, and others involved with this group must extend their focus to the post-release period, when the difficulties of resettlement and recovery begin to emerge, even as the immediate ordeal of captivity appears to have ended.

This study contributes to the broader field of political prisoner research and is among the few that specifically address the gender dimension of this issue. Further exploring this topic through a gender-sensitive lens could significantly enrich academic knowledge.

Additionally, this work serves as a reference point for future research on the resettlement of political prisoners and the role of civil society in this process. Future studies could focus on the experiences of queer political prisoners and their relationships with their partners, an aspect that was not explored in this thesis due to the limitations outlined in the study. Moreover, it would be valuable to examine the role of civil society representatives in shaping and implementing reconciliation policies in societies with a significant number of political prisoners, particularly in cases where conflicts may have arisen among them during their imprisonment.

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Appendix

List of questions for interviews

Set I: questions regarding the impact of political imprisonment on women's resettlement into society.

1. What did former political prisoners tell you about their primary needs after being released?
2. Which aspects of life are most significantly impacted by their imprisonment, in your opinion?
3. Based on your experience, have former female political prisoners been able to maintain or resume their partner/romantic relationships established prior to their imprisonment?
4. How have their relationships with family members been affected post-release? Have these relationships sustained the same level of closeness?
5. How has imprisonment influenced their friendships? Have they formed lasting bonds with fellow prisoners, and do they remain in contact with them after their release?
6. Were these women able to return to their previous employment? If not, what kinds of jobs or retraining opportunities have they pursued?
7. What language(s) have they primarily spoken since their release, in your opinion?
8. Have their political views and willingness to engage in political activities evolved since their release?
9. How do former political prisoners assess their experiences of imprisonment, based on your working experience?
10. Have they developed new hobbies or interests since their release?
11. Have they mentioned any changes in their physical appearance since their release?
12. Have there been any indications of changes in their religious beliefs or faith?
13. Have their cognitive abilities or emotional expression capabilities changed since their release?

Set II: questions about implementing a gender lens in work.

1. What strategies and tools do you employ to support former political prisoners?
2. What factors guide your decision-making in focusing on specific areas of support?
3. Do you consider the factors mentioned above in developing policies for assisting former female political prisoners? If so, how do these considerations influence your work? If not, why?
4. In your opinion, do former female political prisoners have specific needs post-release? If so, please detail these needs and explain their origins.
5. Are there any new tools or strategies you plan to implement to better support former female political prisoners in the future?

List of Belarusian civil society activities helping political prisoners

- Media support;
- Legal support: finding and paying for lawyers;
- Medical assistance: finding and paying for healthcare services;
- Psychological support: finding and paying for psychotherapy;
- Prison-related expenses: payment for prison parcels;
- Family support: covering utility bills, for example;
- Organizing joint cultural activities: attending concerts, museums, the zoo, parties, or city tours;
- Relaxation services: access to massages and similar procedures;
- Childcare support: finding and paying for babysitters, funding extracurricular activities, and assisting with school shopping;
- Mentoring: connecting former political prisoners with mentors who provide financial or moral support;
- Financial aid:
 - €100 for food baskets
 - A one-off payment of €500 upon release
 - A one-off payment of €500 during imprisonment
 - An annual child allowance of €300
- Temporary shelter: up to two months of accommodation;
- Employment assistance: help finding jobs, including remote work opportunities;
- Emigration support: assistance with moving abroad;
- Legalization support: help with the legal status abroad;
- Documentation of repression;
- Fine payment cover;
- Coaching: support in developing professional and life strategies after release;
- Women's clubs: organizing events, leadership programs, creative workshops, self-presentation lectures, and classes on accepting personal appearance;
- Writing letters to current political prisoners;
- Providing safe spaces: for events organized by other non-profits helping political prisoners;
- Organizing group psychotherapy sessions or providing a venue for them;
- Support for exiles: buying clothes for those who fled the country and lost their jobs;
- Buying New Year presents for children of affected families;
- Providing language courses or speaking clubs;
- Community activities: organizing mind games or music events.

