

Research on topics related to the project theme

Belarusian Team

Social change in our local communities

Social change in Belarus is currently a rather complex and sensitive topic. Any social activity by civil society (community formation, street activism, urban improvements, social or volunteer projects, non-profit organizations) is viewed as a development of democracy, a movement against the country's current political system, as well as dissatisfaction with the state and disagreement with the actions of government officials. But even despite this, people inside Belarus continue to be active, implementing various projects, improving the space around them, and forming close ties. While continuing to live within the country, we can observe how people are finding new ways to promote social change. For example, many have now shifted from mass events to local gatherings (within a close circle of trusted individuals) and closed communities. Art projects and environmental movements, which seem “safer” to the state, are particularly strong right now (although previously, the country had many activism efforts to protect LGBTQ+ rights, promote inclusivity, fight for political rights, and campaign against the death penalty etc.). It's also very interesting to see how young people, unable to join the various activist movements that have disappeared in the country over the past six years, are starting to create their own – and doing incredible things.

And now we really want to share the most striking examples of social projects and changes that are currently taking place in the country – even in such terribly difficult conditions.

1. For almost 10 years, a large nursery of ancient plants, contemporaries of dinosaurs, has been under construction in a Belarusian village. This is the ginkgo biloba tree, which is considered the ideal tree for greening modern

European cities in the era of climate change. This project began with a young Belarusian who wanted to promote climate change adaptation and biodiversity conservation by popularizing this amazing tree. Thus, "[Ginkgo Labyrinth](#)" was born, where he grows trees, creates a sustainable forest of the future and engages in environmental education.

2. Belarus has a highly developed agricultural sector, and our country is renowned for its high-quality farm produce. However, organic farming is hardly promoted or supported here. But there are still a few people who have become passionate about this topic and have become pioneers in Belarus, who are now inspiring others. For example, [farmer Ekaterina](#), who spent her entire life as a lawyer, suddenly fell in love with farming and created an organic flower plantation. Now she is one of the few people in the entire country who grows flowers in an environmentally-friendly way and works with native plants. [Irina](#), from a small town in Belarus, also created her own city farm – Rootland. She practices hydroponics and grows microgreens, promotes organic farming among the local population, and creates access to healthy food for the local community.
3. Some environmental NGOs remain in our country, such as "[Wildlife Nearby](#)". They promote scientific knowledge about Belarus's natural environment, organize volunteer projects and even research and establish new protected natural areas. This subproject is called "Wild Expeditions". Funded by donations, NGO members travel to unique natural sites in Belarus with researchers from the academy of sciences and write proposals for protecting these territories.
4. For many years, Belarus has had a unique public environmental monitoring project. The [AirMQ](#) platform was created by several concerned Belarusians who wanted to monitor air quality in their cities in real time and have independent, open data. They created a project in

which anyone could install a sensor near their window that monitors air quality and transmits it online to their website. These sensors were installed in various Belarusian cities, and eventually even in other countries – Lithuania, Poland, Georgia, and elsewhere – where Belarusians were most often forced to migrate.

5. The social project "[Second life for books](#)" where people search for books in wastepaper and redirect them to schools, orphanages, libraries and museums. The project began with a married couple who worked at a wastepaper collection center. They noticed that along with the paper waste, they often received books that could still be used, and some of them were even valuable or rare. So, they agreed with the management to sort the books separately and redirect them to educational institutions.
6. Some projects received a wide response, such as "Green classes" and "[Green schools](#)". One biology teacher was passionate about environmental education and believed that the topic wasn't being sufficiently promoted in the current education system. He decided to create a project with individual ecology lessons where children could learn to love and protect nature through hands-on experience. He created a blog on social media and was noticed by representatives from the Ministry of Education, who suggested using his idea as a basis for a large-scale environmental education project across the country.
7. There are several inspiring people working at the intersection of ecology and art. Designer [Artur](#) recycles plastic and advertising posters himself, creating bags and various clothing items from them. There's also a project in the regional city Vitebsk called [Replastiq](#), which recycles plastic waste and makes various souvenirs and decorations. Belarus doesn't have a well-developed waste separation system, so projects like these are especially important in promoting this topic.

8. We also talked about youth communities! One of the most vibrant has emerged in Brest. It's the urban community "[UrbanLab](#)" where passionate students are engaged in project work on sustainable urban development. They promote sustainable mobility, increase inclusiveness and engage in social design.

There were some wonderful projects in our country that were forced to close:

1. Two projects worked with homeless people. The first was "[Food Not Bombs](#)" in which a group of activists gathered several times a week in parks across the capital and fed homeless people hot meals. The second was "[Street Medicine](#)" in which a group of caring medics held weekly street visits and checkups for homeless people, providing them with basic medical care, transportation, wound care and even some pills.

Social change through a diaspora lens, a belarusian perspective from Vilnius

While my colleagues have vividly described the courage of people driving social change inside Belarus, I'd like to add a perspective that is often overlooked, the role of the Belarusian diaspora abroad, specifically in Vilnius, where I have been living and studying for the past three years. After the contested 2020 presidential election and the brutal crackdown that followed, Lithuania became home to thousands of Belarusians who were forced to leave. What emerged in Vilnius is not just a refugee community, it is a full-scale ecosystem for sustaining and expanding Belarusian civil society from exile.

Vilnius has historically been a centre for Belarusian cultural life. The [Ivan Luckievich Belarusian Museum](#), originally founded in 1921, was the first Belarusian national museum. After decades of dormancy, it was revived and now operates within the [Belarusian House, also called Centre of Belarusian Culture and Community](#), — a space provided by the Vilnius municipality, which also hosts a library, a Sunday school, and cultural events. Every year the

Belarusian House holds a full [Belarusian Culture Week](#) with book presentations, heritage lectures, traditional crafts fairs and folk celebrations, a really joyful act of cultural preservation that is unfortunately almost impossible to organize openly in Belarus itself.

A couple of words about education and media in exile:

My own university, the [European Humanities University \(EHU\)](#) (*Half-Extremists :)))*, was forced out of Belarus in 2004 and re-established in Vilnius in 2005. The Uni in exile, yep. It remains the only truly independent Belarusian university, educating mostly students from Belarus and the region with a European-standard Liberal Arts curriculum. Alongside EHU, the [Francysk Skaryna Gymnasium](#) has been operating in Vilnius since 1993 as the only school with Belarusian as the language of instruction. In January 2026, the Belarusian community lobbied the Vilnius municipality to ensure the gymnasium's future, with over 200 parents, intellectuals, and public figures signing a letter of support.

Independent Belarusian media also operate from Vilnius. For example, [Nasha Niva](#) (*Extremists*), Belarus's oldest newspaper (founded in 1906), was outlawed by the regime in 2021, but its team relocated and continues to reach audiences inside Belarus through innovative digital solutions that bypass the state's censorship. In 2024, Belarusians in Lithuania donated over €15,000 to Nasha Niva through Lithuania's tax allocation system.

Several key organizations supporting Belarusians are now headquartered in Vilnius. [BYSOL](#) (*Extremists*) (Belarus Solidarity Foundation) helps released political prisoners and their families, people forced to emigrate, and funds democratic initiatives inside Belarus. [Dapamoga](#) (*Extremists*), a community organization, has assisted hundreds of arriving Belarusians with housing, legal support, Lithuanian language classes, and job searching. There is also the [New](#)

[Belarus platform](#) (*Extremists*) — a digital civic tech ecosystem uniting Belarusians worldwide, built from Lithuania.

Why does all this matter for social change?

From my personal experience, living between these two realities — Belarus and Lithuania — shows that social change doesn't stop at the border, whatever official government says. The diaspora tries to keep the Belarusian language, culture and identity alive in a way that is no longer possible at home. It maintains independent media, funds grassroots projects inside Belarus, and creates professional and cultural communities that sustain hope. The relocated tech companies, the folklore festivals at the Belarusian House, the Saturday morning children's classes in Belarusian, all of this is social change, just happening from 170 kilometers away from the capital. And it proves that even when a state tries to crush civil society, people find ways to rebuild it, sometimes even in a neighbouring capital.

Human rights, inclusion, diversity, and environmental justice

These four concepts like human rights, inclusion, diversity, and environmental justice might sound like separate chapters in a textbook, but in reality they are deeply interconnected. You cannot have genuine environmental justice without truly inclusion, you cannot build a diverse society without protecting human rights. And for many young people all across Europe, especially those from countries with authoritarian regimes, these are not abstract values, they are lived, daily struggles.

Belarus is one of the most striking examples of how quickly human rights can be dismantled. Since the disputed 2020 presidential election (and several times before it), the government has conducted what the UN Group of Independent Experts in 2025 called "widespread and systematic" violations against civilians,

some amounting to crimes against humanity. As of late 2025, over 1,135 political prisoners remain behind bars, including journalists, doctors, lawyers, and human rights defenders, book publishers etc. The [Viasna Human Rights Centre](#) (*extremists*), founded by Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, has been the backbone of documenting these abuses for decades. Bialiatski himself was imprisoned for years and only released in December 2025, after sustained international pressure. His case is a powerful reminder that defending human rights can and for sure will cost you your freedom.

Inclusion and diversity in our communities is still a fight.

Inclusion remains a challenge even in EU countries. In Lithuania, where I currently live, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) noted in its 2024 report that the LGBTQ+ community remains one of the most disadvantaged groups, with no dedicated equality strategy or working group in place. Roma communities face even deeper structural exclusion, according to the 2021 census, only 5% of Roma in Lithuania were employed, and access to education remains unequal. Organizations like [Diversity Development Group](#) are working to change this through research, community projects and direct support for refugees and asylum seekers. But it still feels better developed than in Belarus. Feels more safe.

Because in Belarus, the situation for marginalized groups is far worse. Over 575,000 people, that's about 6% of the population, are registered as persons with disabilities, yet in 2020 the government shut down the independent [Office for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#) along with more than 1,500 other civil society organizations. LGBTQ+ individuals face targeted persecution, the UN documented cases of security forces using physical violence and dehumanizing language specifically against queer detainees. Belarusian LGBTQ+ activists, many of whom are now in exile, continue their work from abroad, but face

infiltration attempts and pressure for them and their families even outside the country.

As a Belarusian student living in Vilnius, I could see both sides of this picture. In Lithuania, civil society is imperfect but functional, because organizations can operate, people can protest if there is a need, and the media can report. In Belarus, doing any of these things can and will quickly lead to prison. This contrast makes me appreciate the fragility of the rights we sometimes take for granted and the importance of youth engagement across borders.

Representation of social issues in media and digital storytelling

Social issues are present in Belarusian media (considering mass media in general), but it is important to point out that most media outlets in Belarus are state-controlled. As a result, information is strongly censored and these issues are not covered fully or critically. Independent media do exist; however, their websites are often blocked, which makes access from inside the country impossible without using a VPN. Moreover, many of these outlets are officially labelled as “extremist materials” or “extremist formations,” so consuming their content may lead to administrative or even criminal liability.

At the same time, there are still some non-state media that continue to operate normally because they remain relatively neutral and avoid direct criticism of the political situation in the country. Therefore, they still create opportunities to raise awareness about social issues. One example is onliner.by. This platform frequently publishes stories about local environmental problems. For instance, it once covered a [case](#) in Maryina Horka (a small town east of Minsk), where a river became overgrown due to pesticides from a nearby agricultural field. Public attention to the issue eventually helped to resolve the problem and restore the river. The same outlet also reports on many other social challenges in

Belarus, such as the issue of [stray animals](#), [stories of people with disabilities](#), and much more.



Despite the existing problems with media in Belarus, people are clearly finding alternative ways to spread information about social issues in the digital space. Social media platforms often become such alternatives, especially TikTok and YouTube, as these platforms are not blocked in Belarus. Their algorithms also make it easier for people to discover content related to their interests, even without subscribing to specific channels.

A vivid example is the TikTok channel [Mikrazielanina](#), which has been active since 2023. It focuses on explaining how environmental problems in Belarus can be addressed and, more broadly, how people can adopt more sustainable lifestyles. The host presents these topics in a creative and sometimes humorous way, which helps to engage a wider audience. The range of topics is very diverse: from discussing which Christmas tree is the most environmentally friendly for Christmas and New Year, or what kind of toilet paper is better for the environment, to practical advice on what to do if you encounter a bear or a moose in the forest. The channel is in the Belarusian language, which also contributes to promoting its use inside Belarus. Unfortunately, due to the long-term historical and cultural influence of Russia on the country, the majority of people in Belarus primarily speak Russian in their everyday lives.

“extremism” labels are often used to limit access to information and scare audiences away.

Because of this, some social topics are easier to discuss than others. Safer topics are usually local and practical, such as housing problems, environmental issues, charity, or personal stories of hardship. More sensitive topics, like labour rights, repression, discrimination, or the role of state institutions, are much less visible in mainstream media. Instead, they often appear indirectly through personal stories, workplace conflicts, or migration experiences. The UN Special Rapporteur also noted in July 2025 that repression in Belarus has affected not only political rights, but also social and economic rights, including employment.

At the same time, Belarus remains a highly connected country. Internet use is very high, which supports the spread of short videos, personal channels, and messenger-based media. This makes digital storytelling especially important. But high connectivity exists alongside strong digital control, so creators often use humour, everyday topics, and emotional personal stories to make criticism less direct and therefore safer.

Another important fact is that much Belarusian media is now created outside the country. Migration after 2020 changed the whole media landscape. Official data shows the scale: by the end of 2023, nearly 119,000 Belarusians had valid residence documents in Poland, and at the beginning of 2025, 57,500 Belarusians were legally living in Lithuania. These communities matter because many journalists, activists, and creators now work abroad, where they can speak more openly.

As a result, social issues in Belarus are represented in two different ways: inside the country they are usually shown as local, personal, and non-political, while more sensitive and structural problems are discussed mainly in diaspora media and digital formats.

Links:

<https://cdn.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/d/5/543240.pdf>

<https://datahub.itu.int/data/?c=1&e=BLR&i=11624&v=&utm>

<https://rfom.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/528318>

Existing initiatives or good practices

After the political crisis of 2020 and the subsequent repression of civil society in Belarus, many non-governmental organizations were forced to relocate abroad. Despite the liquidation of NGOs inside the country, numerous initiatives continue to operate in exile, providing support for vulnerable groups, documenting human rights violations, and maintaining international advocacy for Belarusian civil society.

Initiatives

1)“Journalists for Tolerance” (J4T) (extremists)

Journalists for Tolerance is a Belarusian human rights initiative that monitors hate speech and discrimination in the media. The organization conducts research and media monitoring, publishes analytical reports, and promotes ethical journalism standards. J4T focuses on improving media representation of vulnerable groups and raising awareness about discrimination in public discourse.

Sphere : Monitoring hate speech in media, Analyzing discriminatory narratives, Training journalists in ethical and inclusive reporting

What do they do: Helps reduce discrimination in media content, Promotes professional standards of responsible journalism, Provides data and analysis for further advocacy and education

2) Gpress Media Platform (extremists)

G Press is an independent Belarusian online media platform that focuses on LGBTQ+ issues, gender equality, and human rights. The outlet publishes news, analytical articles, and interviews about discrimination, social policies, and activism in Belarus and the region. G Press also serves as an information platform for civil society initiatives and helps raise awareness about the situation of marginalized communities.

Sphere: media publishing

What do they do? Provides a safe space for underrepresented voices, Raises awareness about discrimination and inequality, Acts as both an information source and advocacy tool

3) Human Constanta (!!extremists!!)

Human Constanta is a Belarusian human rights organization that focuses on migration, digital rights, and protection of vulnerable groups. The organization conducts research, legal advocacy, and monitoring of human rights violations. It also provides consultations and produces reports on discrimination, migration policy, and restrictions on freedom of expression.

Sphere: human rights, advocacy, trainings, cyber safety

What do they do?

A lot of research about human rights, not only in Belarus; advocacy. They also have football club **FairPlay**, where they organize football games in human rights themes.

4) TG House (!!extremists!!)

TG House is a trans-led initiative that supports the transgender community in Belarus. The organization provides psychological support, crisis assistance, and

information resources for transgender individuals. It also works on advocacy, awareness-raising, and monitoring discrimination against trans people.

Sphere? LGBTQ+, transgender transitions in Belarus, supporting, advocacy

What do they do? They tell about transgender transition and LGBTQ+ people in Belarus and also help with evacuation

5) Prismatic (extremists)

Prismatic is a queer-feminist initiative that supports LGBTQ+ people affected by repression in Belarus. The organization documents discrimination and violence, provides advocacy on international platforms, and calls for protection mechanisms for LGBTQ+ activists forced into exile. Prismatic also produces statements and analytical materials on human rights violations.

Sphere: LGBTQI+, queeractivism, feminism, ecoactivism, inclusion

What do they do: discrimination and repression support, queer support inside Belarus

6) RADA Belarusian Youth Council (extremists)

The Belarusian Youth Council RADA is a democratic umbrella organization representing Belarusian youth NGOs and initiatives. After the repression of civil society in Belarus, RADA continued its work in exile. The council supports youth activism, coordinates cooperation between youth organizations, and represents Belarusian youth interests in international institutions and European youth networks.

Sphere: youth exchange, activism

What do they do? Support youth inside Belarus and promote their interests in EU

Civil Society and Social Initiatives

In addition to human rights NGOs, there are also social initiatives and community projects that support people in need and promote solidarity.

Kali Laska is a charity shop initiative that collects second-hand clothes and distributes them to people in need, while also selling some items to support social projects.

Symbal.by is a cultural initiative that promotes Belarusian culture, language, and national identity through clothing, books, and cultural products.

Marks is an independent bookstore project that focuses on Belarusian literature and books by Belarusian authors. The project helps promote Belarusian language and culture and supports independent publishing initiatives.

Projects like these show how Belarusian civil society continues to develop through solidarity, creativity, and cultural initiatives, even in difficult political conditions.

Trainings

Because all these initiatives are outside Belarus, they can't provide offline events. But the solution to this problem is to make all events online, like workshops, peer-support, Zoom educational events and training. They also make it on different themes, for example inclusion, cyber safety, history of LGBTQI+ in Belarus, migration issues, mental health or just English speaking club, why not?

But the most important thing in their work is to make offline educational training/camps for people inside Belarus. That's a really big task not just to organize training, but to organize and help people from Belarus to come to another country for offline training. The most popular trainings programs are:

1) **Queer Camp by Prismatica**

(LGBTQ+,feminism,ecoactivism,activism,inclusion)

2) **Human Camp by Human Constanta** (human rights, inclusion, non-violence, sport)

Why is it a good practice? Improves professional competencies of media workers, Encourages dissemination of inclusive practices, Strengthens civil society resilience.

Messages We Want to Communicate Through Storytelling

1. Human Rights Are Universal

Key message: Equality and dignity are fundamental rights, not privileges.

Stories emphasize that human rights apply to everyone, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or social status.

2. Visibility Matters

Key message: Increasing visibility helps challenge stereotypes and reduce prejudice.

Highlight personal experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and other marginalized groups.

3. Discrimination Has Real Consequences

Key message: Discrimination is not abstract; it has tangible human impact.

Through real-life stories, to show how discrimination affects people's lives — including: social exclusion, violence, mental health challenges

4. Resilience and Solidarity

Key message: Solidarity strengthens communities and enables resistance to injustice.

Many stories focus on how individuals and communities support each other despite difficult conditions.

5. The Importance of Responsible Media

Key message: Ethical and inclusive storytelling can counter hate speech and misinformation.

Highlight the role of journalists in shaping public attitudes.

6. Change Is Possible

Key message: Social change is achievable through awareness, education, and collective action.

Even in restrictive environments like Belarus, stories often include examples of progress, activism, and small victories.