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# Sustaining independent journalism: **Civil society organisations' support for Belarusian and Russian exiled media**

2024



# Introduction

The Thomson Reuters Foundation is proud to commission the report, produced by The Fix, ‘Sustaining independent journalism: Civil society organisations’ support for Belarusian and Russian exiled media’. This report comes at a pivotal moment as the ecosystem for exiled independent media in Central and Eastern Europe continues to adapt and develop in response to severe political repression in Belarus and Russia.

This report analyses the needs and support provided to Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile. It does this in three key ways. Firstly, the report highlights how the needs of the independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile compare with the support provided by civil society organisations. Secondly, the report analyses the differences across five host countries - Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland - in their support of Belarusian and Russian media. Thirdly, the report assesses how the needs and support provided have evolved over time, whilst finding current areas for improvement.

After the executive summary, the first section of this report presents an analysis of the political and media landscapes that directly or indirectly influence operations and support of independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile. The second section maps the Belarusian and Russian media operating in the host countries reviewed in this study, and explores their needs and challenges, as well as the changing political contexts. In this section, we highlight differences between the needs of the Belarusian and Russian independent media. The third section

presents an analytical reflection on the assistance that civil society organisations (CSOs) currently provide to exiled media. Finally, the report highlights key trends and expected developments concerning the operation of the independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile, as well as the assistance provided to them.

As part of the Thomson Reuters Foundation’s work to build resilience against evolving threats to media freedom around the world and safeguard the future of the profession, we are committed to supporting independent media in exile.

Our comprehensive programme of support ensures that independent media in exile can continue delivering high-quality, consistent coverage of critical issues. We provide a combination of training, mentorship, and legal assistance to help media outlets navigate unfamiliar legislation and operate effectively in new environments. Additionally, we offer access to long-term, bespoke business planning consultancy, which is crucial for their sustainability. By supporting media established in Europe by exiled journalists, we aim to safeguard the future of independent journalism.

This report not only highlights the pressing needs and challenges faced by exiled media but also underscores the vital role of CSOs in providing the necessary support to ensure their survival and continued impact. Through collaboration and collective action, we can help to shape a resilient, viable and independent media ecosystem that upholds the principles of impartiality and freedom of expression.

While efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, the rapidly changing political and media landscapes may affect the relevance of the information. Readers are advised to independently verify details and seek professional advice as needed.

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# Executive summary

Political repression in Belarus and Russia, coupled with diminishing space for independent journalism, has forced dozens of media outlets into exile. Fleeing repression, many of these outlets relocated to EU countries. As a result, Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland have become new homes for approximately 80 Russian and 48 Belarusian independent media organisations, as identified in this study. In exile, these media outlets continued serving their audiences, remaining a key voice of objective, high-quality journalism amidst growing censorship and propaganda in their home countries.

Upon relocating, most independent media from Belarus and Russia faced numerous challenges, including financial sustainability, team legalisation, wellbeing, and maintaining audience reach. Some of these difficulties stem from the changing political landscapes in the host countries reviewed in this report. While Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland provided a safe space for these exiled media outlets, they simultaneously adjusted national security policies to mitigate threats from Belarusian and Russian authoritarian regimes. This created institutional challenges, particularly in distinguishing independent journalists from Belarus and Russia from others affected by restrictive policies targeting their nationals and organisations. The five host countries have provided crucial support to the independent media in exile and respondents of this study expressed appreciation for the assistance of these particular countries. At the same time, comparing the conditions across the countries, the respondents in this study generally perceived Latvia as the most favourable host country, in terms of personal and professional conditions, and

Lithuania as the least favourable. A worrying exception to the average positive assessment of living and working conditions in the host countries is the experience of media employees from marginalised gender identities.

National and international civil society organisations (CSOs) that support independent media in these five host countries have played a vital role in helping exiled Belarusian and Russian media adapt to their new environments. From legal and financial assistance to operational and mental health support, CSOs have provided complex, flexible, and needs-based aid. However, the study highlights several aspects of support that remain unaddressed. For example, a new challenge identified by the respondents of this study relates to the lack of human resources for administrative, managerial and reporting roles, as well as for the development of commercial products within media organisations. Some challenges arise from growing pressure from the Belarusian and Russian governments, while others stem from the increasing costs of maintaining a functioning and relevant media entity in exile.

Optimising and improving support for exiled independent media has become a priority for CSOs. While striving for more flexible funding, CSOs have also emphasised the need for better coordination among themselves. Improved information exchange would help identify gaps in support for independent media and prevent the duplication of programmes and projects. However, the current funding structure and competitiveness between some CSOs hinder efforts to optimise support for exiled media.

The needs, conditions, and assessments of support received by Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile differ considerably. While some Russian outlets commercialise, for most Belarusian media, business models of operation seem inorganic and unrealistic. Furthermore, Belarusian media workers have voiced concerns over limited access to funding, particularly for smaller media teams, compared to their larger counterparts or to Russian media in exile.

CSOs supporting independent media must enhance their visibility, both to media organisations and political stakeholders. The survey conducted for this study

revealed a threefold higher recognition rate for certain key CSOs over others that have significantly contributed to the development of independent media in exile. Greater visibility of CSOs would strengthen the impact of media support. Besides, as political landscapes determine the fate of aid to independent media, as well as the conditions for the media in the host countries, CSOs' advocacy on a political level becomes more and more crucial. Lastly, as tech giants continue to influence the outreach of independent media to their home audiences, stronger advocacy in this area is needed to ensure millions of Belarusian and Russian citizens have access to objective news coverage.



alt- Silhouettes of journalists and camera operators filming and photographing in a conference setting, positioned in front of large windows that diffuse natural light into the room. The image captures a moment of professional media activity during an event.

# Political and media landscape in key host countries

With the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war in Ukraine in 2022, the pressure on non-state Russian media increased. As Putin signed amendments to articles 31 and 151 of Russia's Criminal Code, journalists could no longer freely report on the situation on the frontlines, risking criminal punishments for disseminating "unreliable information."<sup>1</sup> This led to cases of self-censorship among the independent Russian media and pushed many of these media into exile to maintain quality reporting and ensure the safety of their employees. As a result, dozens of independent Russian media teams relocated and were forced to continue reporting in a new reality: exiled and deprived of their right to freely report from their homeland.

By this time, most Belarusian independent media had already established their organisations in neighbouring countries. In the aftermath of the large-scale electoral protests in 2020, dozens of journalists were imprisoned or threatened.<sup>2</sup> As the repressions of the Belarusian regime escalated, May 2021 marked the beginning of a large-scale attack on the independent media community. Firstly, the authorities searched the offices and forcefully closed the largest independent media TUT.by.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the Belarusian regime implemented a practice of recognising independent media as 'extremist formations', placing any journalist working for such media under direct risk of criminal prosecution.<sup>4</sup> As most independent media fled the country, those remaining had to renegotiate the terms under which they worked, including a complete avoidance of reporting on political and social topics. Most Belarusian independent media

eventually relocated to Poland and Lithuania, with smaller groups continuing their work from Czechia or Estonia. Germany, Czechia and Latvia became the main European operating hubs for Russian independent media. The principal reasons behind choosing a particular country for relocation included the opportunities available in the host country, along with geographical, personal, and cultural ties.<sup>5</sup> In this section, we review the political context and legal conditions in the five European countries that host the largest number of Belarusian and Russian exiled independent media (EXIM).

As the geopolitical situation continues to deteriorate amid Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine, political priorities within the host countries have evolved. Changes include a greater focus on national security, decreasing budgets for civil society development<sup>6</sup> and more restrictive legislation targeting Belarusian and Russian passport holders. At the same time, these countries host the largest number of independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media within the EU, with Poland hosting the most Belarusian journalists and Germany the most exiled Russian media employees (see more in Exhibit 3 p. 17).

The present report relies on an online survey (N=44) and semi-structured interviews with representatives from the Belarusian and Russian exiled independent media community (N=17), and on the semi-structured interviews with the CSOs who provide assistance to the independent media in exile (N=14) (see more on the

<sup>1</sup> Liability for disseminating fakes about the actions of the Russian Armed Forces is being introduced, Federal Assembly of Russia (State Duma), 4 March 2022

<sup>2</sup> Repressions against journalists in Belarus 2024, list of colleagues in prison, Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), 8 April 2024

<sup>3</sup> Shutdown Of Belarus' Largest Independent News Site Part Of 'War Against Genuine Journalists', Critics Say, Current Time, 19 May 2021

<sup>4</sup> Как преследуют белорусов за коммуникацию с "экстремистскими" медиа, Вясна (Viasna), 29 August 2023

<sup>5</sup> Exile Journalism in Europe Current challenges and support programmes, Körber-Stiftung, 2022

<sup>6</sup> Civil society organization sustainability index, central and eastern Europe and Eurasia, November 2023

methodological approach in the appendix, p. 70).

One of the survey questions concerned an assessment of organisational and personal working conditions for EXIM in their host country, on a 10-point scale. The average assessment of working conditions for media organisations was 6.7 for independent Belarusian media and 6 for independent Russian media. Latvia received the highest assessment score (8), and Lithuania the lowest (5.9). Responses differed according to the roles of respondents: the most positive assessment came from communication specialists, while people who combined several roles within media teams were the most pessimistic.

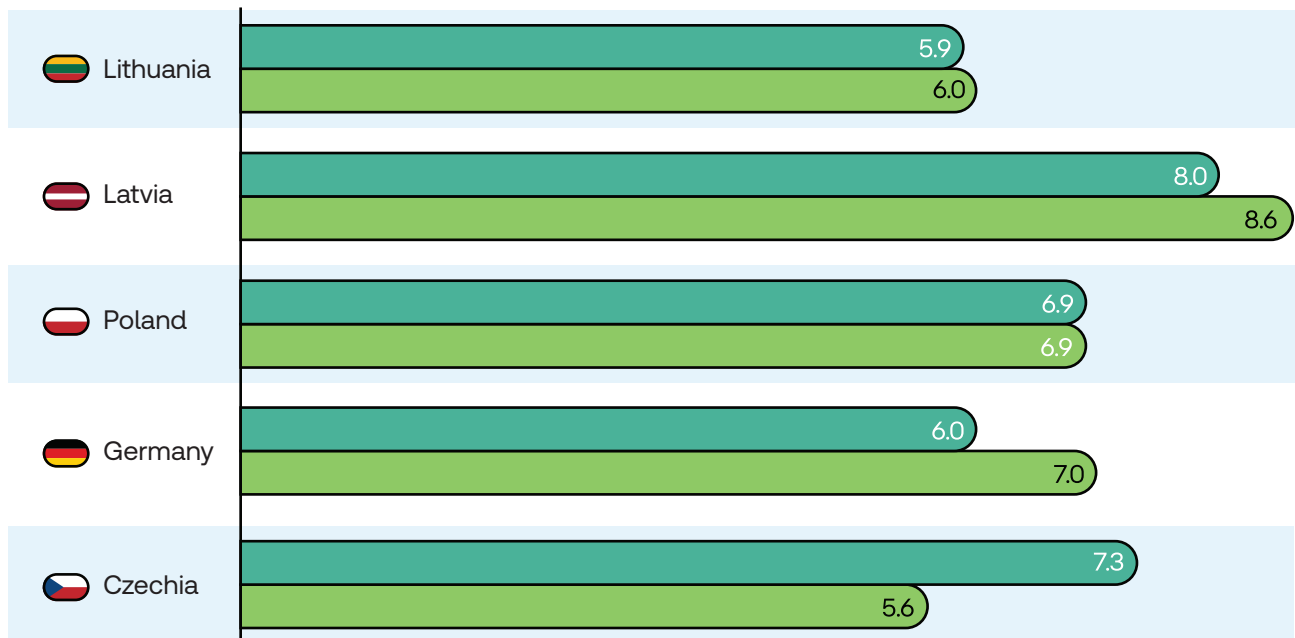
In terms of personal working conditions, the average assessment among independent Belarusian media was 6.7, the same as their average rating for organisational conditions. The average rating among independent Russian media was 6.3, slightly higher than their rating for organisational conditions. Latvia again received the highest rating (8.6), while Czechia received the lowest (5.6). Once again, there was a difference between different jobholders: administrative and managerial employees were the most positive and journalists were the most pessimistic.

The year of relocation made no significant difference to responders' assessment of personal or organisational working conditions in the host country.

Exhibit 1

### Assessment of personal and organisational working conditions in the host countries

- Average assessment of working conditions for media teams
- Average assessment of personal conditions

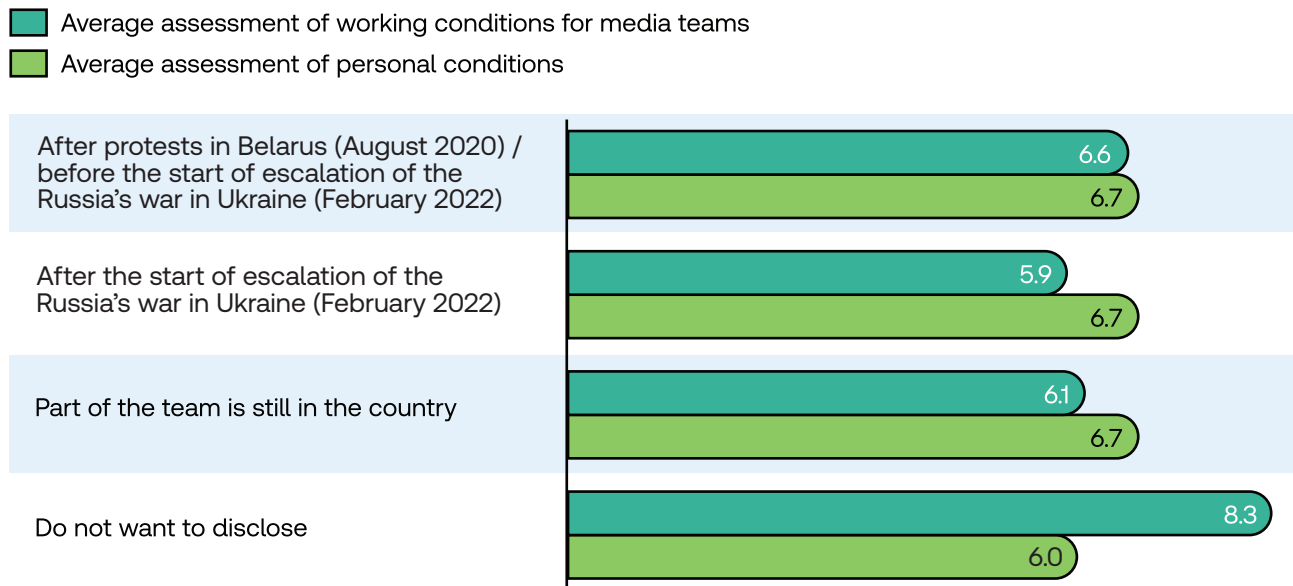


Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: How do you rate the working conditions for your editorial office in the country of relocation? and How do you rate the working conditions in the relocation country for you personally? Answers were measured against the country of registration of media. No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

alt= Exhibit 1: Working Conditions by Host Country  
 This chart illustrates the average assessments of organisational and personal working conditions for the Belarusian and Russian independent exiled media teams across five host countries (Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland). Ratings reflect responses from 44 Belarusian and Russian media representatives, with two main categories: "working conditions for media teams" and "personal conditions." The highest organisational rating was in Latvia, and the lowest in Lithuania, with similar patterns for personal conditions across countries.



### Assessment of personal and organisational working conditions depending on the year of relocation



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: How do you rate the working conditions for your editorial office in the country of relocation? and How do you rate the working conditions in the relocation country for you personally? Answers were measured against the year of a media's relocation. No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

## Czechia

In Czechia, the institutional, political, and socio-economic landscape is characterised by recent political shifts and persistent challenges.<sup>7</sup> Following the elections in October 2021, a conservative-liberal coalition government took office.<sup>8</sup> The government's efforts have been focused on maintaining coalition unity.

The country has been heavily affected by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, resulting in a large influx of refugees who were received with solidarity by Czech society, with volunteers, citizen initiatives and donations compensating for the missing capacities of the state.<sup>9</sup>

Municipalities and civil society organisations developed partnerships with international entities to strengthen their national system and address these challenges successfully.<sup>10</sup> However, financial constraints such as the energy crisis, high inflation rates and the rising costs of living created a challenge for both the public and the state.<sup>11</sup>

The year of relocation made no significant difference to responders' assessment of personal or organisational working conditions in the host country.

alt= Exhibit 2: Working Conditions by Relocation Period

This chart compares assessments of organisational and personal conditions based on when independent media relocated, considering three periods: after Belarus protests and before the Russian-Ukrainian war escalation, after the escalation of the war, and ongoing. Personal and organisational conditions are rated similarly across periods.

<sup>7</sup> Civic Space Report 2023 CZECH REPUBLIC, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

<sup>8</sup> ibid

<sup>9</sup> Governance of migrant integration in Czechia, European Commission, last update published June 2024

<sup>10</sup> UNICEF Refugee Response Office In The Czech Republic - Results and priorities, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), February 2024

<sup>11</sup> Civic Space Report 2023 CZECH REPUBLIC, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

The financial landscape for civil society organisations in Czechia has been volatile and unstable, mainly shaped by geopolitical tensions, such as the war in Ukraine, and also by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

While some civil society organisations (CSOs) providing emergency assistance saw growth, many others faced uncertainties in funding sources.<sup>13</sup> CSOs encountered barriers in accessing public grants, such as complex application processes and administrative burdens, which increased their reliance on a single type of funding and hindered long-term financial planning.<sup>14</sup> Efforts to counter this included the establishment of an Expert Group on systemic change, which aimed to evaluate the current system and propose solutions to simplify funding for CSOs.<sup>15</sup>

In Czechia, there are “no restrictions on ownership of media services by a foreign person.” However, with the amendment of Act No. 159/2006, a public officer is prohibited “from being a provider of television or radio broadcasting and being a publisher of periodicals”, which in principle limits the direct influence of state officials on the media sector.<sup>16</sup>

The Council for Radio and Television Broadcasting must grant authorisation to any newly established media platforms that intend to report information. In a press release from May 2024, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that they provided over “25 million Czech crowns [an equivalent to 990,000 EUR] annually for projects supporting independent media, media literacy, and journalist training” through the Transformation of Cooperation Program.<sup>17</sup> The country also “financially supports the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund.”<sup>18</sup>

Czechia has recognised the importance of protecting journalists, who undoubtedly play a key role in maintaining the transparency and independence of the media.

At the Global Conference on Media Freedom held in Tallinn in February 2022, Czechia committed to offering rapid emergency visas to journalists at risk.<sup>19</sup>

*“The Czech Republic pledged to provide rapid emergency visas to journalists in danger. Since then, the Czech Republic has given hundreds of these visas to journalists, predominantly those fleeing Russia and Belarus.”<sup>20</sup>*

Launched in May, the program is designed to assist journalists and civil society activists in danger. It also collaborates with Czech NGOs to aid journalists once they arrive in Czechia.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the invasion of Ukraine substantially affected this arrangement, and Czechia stopped issuing visas and residence permits to Russians and Belarusians, except for cases of public interest and family reunions. Prime Minister Petr Fiala announced this indefinite ban, extending a previous temporary measure. This ban does not apply to political asylum seekers, and the government plans to support opposition activists and students from Russia and Belarus who oppose their regimes. The Council of Europe Platform to promote the protection of journalism and the safety of journalists expressed deep concern to Prime Minister Fiala regarding the security threats faced by exiled Russian journalists in Czechia, specifically highlighting the cases of Irina Dolinina and Alesya Marakhovskaya, employees of the independent Russian media-in-exile outlet iStories.<sup>22</sup>

12 ibid

13 ibid

14 ibid

15 ibid

16 Legal considerations for influencers in the EU, Lexology, 14 June 2019

17 World Press Freedom Day, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, 3 May 2024

18 ibid

19 Safe refugee for journalists: Recent progress from MFC members, Media Freedom Coalition, 1 November 2022

20 ibid

21 ibid

22 Appeal: Protect Exiled Russian Journalists in the Czech Republic, International Press Institute, 20 March 2024

These journalists have been subjected to death threats and stalking by suspected Russian agents in Prague, including access to their flight data across Europe.

Despite an investigation by Czech police, the case was closed without criminal proceedings.

The activists urged the Czech government to reopen the investigation, enhance security measures for the journalists, take action against the perpetrators, and collaborate with European partners to secure personal travel information, emphasising the critical need to support and protect journalists who risk their lives to expose corruption and abuse.<sup>23</sup>

## Germany

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In 2022, Germany saw a shift in its political landscape with a new coalition of liberal, green, and social democratic parties, marking a political transformation from 16 years of conservative leadership.<sup>24</sup> This coalition has shown increased recognition of civil society and has provided a robust and diverse foundation for civic action.<sup>25</sup> It initiated a legal framework to strengthen the democratic engagement of civil society organisations and protect democracy with a governmental proposal for a Democracy Promotion Act (Demokratiefördergesetz).<sup>26</sup>

The Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent energy crisis created significant socioeconomic challenges. Despite strong rule-of-law and democratic indices, Germany has seen a decline in social and political trust.<sup>27</sup> While the number of CSOs in recent years has increased, they face challenges such as a decline in volunteer time, increased informal volunteering, reduced funding due to economic pressures, and opposition from state and non-state actors.<sup>28</sup>

Financially, besides government grants

and service payments, citizens' donations to civil society organisations play a crucial role, although precise figures vary. The Deutscher Spendenrat reported donations totalling €5.8 billion in 2021, marking a 7% increase from the previous year and the highest figure recorded since 2005, while the Deutsches Zentralinstitut für soziale Fragen (DZI) cited a higher figure of €12.9 billion for the same period.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, recent government initiatives, such as the proposed Democracy Promotion Act, have the potential to lead to positive developments in funding the operations of CSOs focused on democracy, human rights and the rule of law.<sup>30</sup>

In recent years, Germany has seen an increase in far-right demonstrations and attacks against protected groups and minorities.<sup>31</sup> Attacks on journalists, particularly during Querdenker protests, have raised concerns, leading to Germany being downgraded in the World Press Freedom Index.<sup>32</sup>

This prompted the creation of a programme to support and protect journalists, media professionals, and defenders

23 ibid

24 Civic Space Report 2023 Germany, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

25 Civil Society in Germany: Data, Facts, Developments, Social Science Open Access Repository (SSOAR), 2024

26 Legal environment and space of civil society organisations in supporting fundamental rights and the rule of law, European Union Agency for Fundamental Human Rights, January 2022

27 Civic Space Report 2023 Germany, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

28 ibid

29 ibid

30 ibid

31 Germany: Events of 2023, Human Rights Watch, 2023

32 Civic Space Report 2023 Germany, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

of freedom of expression in crisis and conflict zones abroad, as well as journalists from other countries residing in Germany.<sup>33</sup> The programme's role was to assist journalists at risk from Afghanistan, Ukraine, Russia and Belarus through emergency scholarships, training initiatives, regional scholarship programmes and centres for exiled journalists in third countries, along with corresponding measures for those exiled in Germany.<sup>34</sup>

At the same time, freedom of the press remains high on the German government's agenda. In 2022, efforts toward this goal developed further when "*the Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Claudia Roth, launched*

*the Hannah Arendt Initiative to support and protect at-risk media professionals.*"<sup>35</sup>

Reporters Without Borders points out that Germany has been the main destination for many journalists seeking asylum.<sup>36</sup> For Belarusians, it became the third most popular country for relocation as the country introduced additional protection possibilities. The number of Belarusians in Germany is officially estimated to have reached 8,000. (However, this is eight times lower than the figure for Lithuania and 12 times lower than for Poland<sup>37</sup>). Among Russian citizens, Germany appeared as the primary EU destination, with about 36,000 new émigrés from Russia to Germany since 2022.

## Latvia

Latvia has built a stable democratic state: fundamental rights are guaranteed by Latvia's Constitution and CSOs operate freely.<sup>38</sup> Significant progress has been achieved in human rights, civil society, and the promotion of public engagement.<sup>39</sup> LGBTQI+ rights, in particular, saw improvements, including a draft Civil Union Law and court recognition of same-sex couples as families.<sup>40</sup> However, the European Court of Human Rights<sup>41</sup> and human rights organisations continue to trace violations of the rights of non-citizen residents of Latvia.<sup>42</sup>

Overall, the pandemic increased government transparency, with online meetings continuing post-emergency, enhancing public access to debates.<sup>43</sup> Efforts to enhance public participation include the TAP Portal for legislative processes, though gaps remain at parliamentary and local levels.<sup>44</sup> There are over 26,000 associations and foundations in Latvia, but many are inactive.<sup>45,46</sup> Latvia's civil society organisations face financial challenges, and around 25% remain financially inactive.<sup>47</sup> Revenue sources are diverse but limited, with many CSOs relying on a single major source for their operations.<sup>48</sup>

33 Safe refugee for journalists: Recent progress from MFC members, Media Freedom Coalition, 1 November 2022

34 *ibid*

35 Working together for freedom of the press: Germany becomes co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition, Media Coalition, 30 January 2024

36 Exile Journalism in Europe: Current Challenges and Support Programmes, Körber-Stiftung, 2022.

37 Дык колькі беларусаў з'ехала?, New Ideas Center, 8 March 2024

38 *ibid*

39 *ibid*

40 Latvia Overview of recent restrictions to civic freedoms: A country research brief from the CIVICUS Monitor, Civicus, November 2022

41 *Andrejeva v. Latvia*, Appl. No. 55707/00, European Court of Human Rights, 18 February 2009

42 Comments on the list of differences between the rights of Latvian citizens and non-citizens. Latvian human rights committee

43 Latvia Overview of recent restrictions to civic freedoms: A country research brief from the CIVICUS Monitor, Civicus, November 2022

44 Civic Space Report 2023 Latvia, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

45 *ibid*

46 Nations in Transit: Latvia, Freedom House, 2024

47 Civic Space Report 2023 Latvia, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

48 *ibid*

Latvia is facing an inflation shock<sup>49</sup> exacerbated by the pandemic and the war in Ukraine. CSOs struggle to secure funding for core activities, while tax rates and frequent regulatory changes remain serious obstacles.<sup>50</sup>

For several years, Latvia has offered a safe territory to independent Russian media organisations that have been forced to operate from outside Russia.<sup>51</sup> In 2020, Latvia extended this support to independent Belarusian media workers who were forced to flee the crackdown on independent newsrooms in the country.<sup>52</sup> Following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, assistance to EXIM increased significantly. Since February 2022, Latvia has issued over 250 visas to independent media workers from Russia, along with approximately 200 visas to their family members. Overall, about 18,000 Russian citizens have moved to Latvia since 2022.<sup>53</sup> There has also been an effort from the government to create an NGO-led media support hub in Riga which provides emergency assistance to independent media workers relocated to Latvia and aids exiled media based in, or represented in Latvia, in adapting their work models to new circumstances.<sup>54</sup>

This assistance, and the active advocacy of CSOs, did not protect TV Rain, an independent Russian broadcast outlet that received a broadcast licence on the 6th of June 2022. Since December 2022, TV Rain has encountered conflicts with the Latvian authorities for using a map

showing Crimea as part of Russia's territory. One of the TV hosts claimed to have assisted mobilised Russians on the front-line, criticising the demolishing of the Soviet monument in Riga.

On the 6th of December, TV Rain's licence was revoked, with the channel accused of being a threat to national security. Since then, TV Rain has broadcast from the Netherlands while continuing court proceedings in Latvia.<sup>55</sup>

In 2022, amendments to Latvia's Electronic Mass Media Law were passed on the grounds of protecting the Latvian information space and promoting greater transparency to prevent the possibility of hidden influence.<sup>56</sup> In particular, these amendments prohibit issuing broadcasting permits to some programmes *"on the basis that the country of jurisdiction of the programme threatens the territorial integrity, sovereignty or national independence of another country."*<sup>57</sup>

The Latvian parliament has also approved *"a government-backed policy planning document"* which stated that *"content created by public media must only be in Latvian and languages belonging to the European cultural space."*<sup>58</sup>

This applies, for instance, to TV distributors who use the Russian language. From January 2026, it will be mandatory for the primary language track to be in Latvian.<sup>59</sup>

49 2022 Country Report - Latvia (Accompanying the document Recommendation for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on the 2022 National Reform Programme of Latvia and delivering a Council opinion on the 2022 Stability Programme of Latvia), European Commission, 23 May 20

50 Civic Space Report 2023 Latvia, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

51 Safe refugee for journalists: recent progress from MFC members, Media Freedom Coalition, 1 November 2022

52 *ibid*

53 За время войны из РФ уехали и не вернулись 666 тысяч человек, DW, 16 July 2024

54 *ibid*

55 Последняя капля «Дождя». Российский телеканал уехал из Риги в Амстердам, но продолжит судиться в Латвии, Новая газета, 15 August 2023

56 New amendments to the Latvian Electronic Mass Media Law enter into force, IRIS Merlin, 2022

57 *ibid*

58 RSF and its partners are extremely concerned by Latvian proposal to ban Russian-language content on public service media, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 9 October 2023

59 *ibid*

# Lithuania

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In Lithuania, the political environment for civil society organisations has evolved significantly. Intensified cooperation between the government and CSOs during the COVID-19 pandemic has continued through subsequent crises, such as the migration issues at the Belarusian border and the humanitarian response to refugees from Ukraine.<sup>60</sup> Organisations like Caritas International and Save the Children were actively involved in providing social services to various migrant groups.

Recently, the legislative amendment to the Law on Personal Income Tax allowed for the allocation of a percentage of income tax to non-profit entities and governmental and municipal institutions. By 2022, Lithuanian taxpayers distributed €27.6 million among 24,000 recipients through this mechanism. A subsequent amendment to the Law on Charity and Support will take effect in 2025. It will limit recipients' eligibility exclusively to NGOs and professional unions.

According to another recently adopted Law on Crisis Management and Civil Protection, NGOs will be invited to join national crisis response efforts, including involvement in humanitarian aid, search and rescue operations and further collaboration with other entities on crisis management.<sup>61</sup>

While the freedom of the press in Lithuania is generally guaranteed and protected, there are concerns about media consolidation among a few large entities, which can have a negative effect on editorial

independence.<sup>62</sup> The Constitution of Lithuania “prohibits censorship and monopolisation of the mass media” and “guarantees freedom of expression and lays down the limits of exercising freedom of expression”<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, The Ministry of Culture “approved an inter-institutional 2023–2025 action plan for the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists”<sup>64</sup> In 2022, the Ministry of Culture proposed establishing a new public institution, the Media Support Fund, to support media outlets that produce information, including, in certain cases, individuals.<sup>65</sup> Simon Kairys, the Minister of Culture, stated that:

*“The updated support model would mean more flexibility and self-governance, and at the same time, less political influence when taking decisions to allocate support for one or another specific project. We certainly see the need to significantly increase the level of support for the media. But to do that, first of all, we have to do our homework: update the media support model itself in a constructive way.”<sup>66</sup>*

As of 2023, the funding of media projects will be attained by the already established Media Support Foundation (SRTR), as well as the Media Support Fund. However, from 2024, all media funds will be “allocated from the Media Support fund only.”<sup>67</sup>

Lithuania became the first country to respond to the needs of Belarusians in exile in 2020, introducing the mechanism of humanitarian visas.

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60 An update on developments regarding civic space in the EU and an overview of the possibilities for human rights defenders to enter EU territory, European Union Agency For Fundamental Human Rights, 2022

61 *ibid*

62 *ibid*

63 Public Information Policy, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania

64 *ibid*

65 Reform of the model for supporting the media: More funds, flexibility and independence, Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Lithuania, 20 June 2022

66 *ibid*

67 *ibid*

Since then, about 1,500 Belarusians at risk, including exiled journalists, obtained humanitarian visas,<sup>68</sup> while according to the lowest estimation, the total wave of emigration from Belarus since 2020 brought over 45,000 Belarusians to a country with a population of 2.8 million.<sup>69</sup>

The Belarusian regime's aggressive facilitation of the migration crisis on the Belarus-Lithuania borders and the subsequent escalation of Russia's war in Ukraine dramatically shook Lithuania in 2022 and laid a path to shifting the country's priorities, with national security at the centre. It marked a decrease in positive decisions on humanitarian visas and asylum applications and an increase in the number of residence permit withdrawals by the Migration services, openly criticised by many Belarusian oppositional activists.

The total number of Russians who fled to Lithuania is less than half the number of Belarusians, at 20,000.<sup>70</sup> During February and March 2022, Lithuania issued over 300 visas to journalists from Russia.<sup>71</sup> Many journalists from Russia and Belarus have since continued their work in Lithuania, with numerous associated media outlets now officially registered there. At the same time, the Lithuanian government is voicing growing concerns regarding the national security threat posed by the residence of many pro-Putin and pro-Lukashenko agents on Lithuanian territory. This has manifested itself through, for example, an attack on journalists and on a member of Navalny's team, Leonid Volkov, who was assaulted in March 2024 in Vilnius.<sup>72</sup>

## Poland

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many Polish CSOs have reorganised their operations to provide aid to Ukrainian refugees, partnering with businesses and local governments and gaining public support.<sup>73</sup> However, this support system, in the absence of prior preparation, has largely materialised through the help of NGOs and individual activists.<sup>74</sup> On a legal level, and despite positive technological advancements and new legislation,<sup>75</sup> bureaucratic obstacles concerning registrations and reporting have led to increasing legal and economic constraints for unregistered NGOs.<sup>76</sup>

Poland has faced high inflation and economic instability, which has further hindered the operational capacities of CSOs.<sup>77</sup> In 2022, personal income tax in Poland was reduced, which means that there is less financial capacity for local governments to support CSOs with funding.<sup>78</sup> However, the financial viability of Polish CSOs remained relatively stable in 2022, while knowledge of fundraising techniques and CSO engagement in economic activities increased.<sup>79</sup>

68 В Литве ужесточают правила. Белорусам нельзя ездить домой?, DW, 9 April 2024

69 Дык колькі беларусаў з'ехала?, New Ideas Center, 8 March 2024

70 В Литве – десятки тысяч россиян и белорусов: Службы предупреждают об угрозах, DELFI, 6 July 2023

71 Safe refugee for journalists: Recent progress from MFC members, Media Freedom Coalition, 1 November 2022

72 В Вильнюсе совершено нападение на соратника Навального Леонида Волкова, BBC News, 12 March 2024

73 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index, Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, November 2023

74 Civic Space Report 2023 Poland, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

75 2022 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Strengthening Civil Society Globally – Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Developed by: United States Agency for International Development Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, in partnership with: FHI 360 International Center for Non-for-Profit Law (ICNL), November 2023

76 Civic Space Report 2023 Poland, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

77 2023 Country Report: Poland, European Commission, 2023

78 Civic Space Report 2023 Poland, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

79 2022 Civil Society Organization Sustainability Index: Strengthening Civil Society Globally – Central and Eastern Europe and Eurasia, Developed by: United States Agency for International Development Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance, in partnership with: FHI 360 International Center for Non-for-Profit Law (ICNL), November 2023

While government support was granted in some cases through the National Freedom Institute and other programmes, a growing share of their funds favoured CSOs that were aligned with the government's objectives.<sup>80</sup> Nationalist organisations received significant funding, while human rights CSOs struggled for support.

Since the Law and Justice Party (PiS) came to power in 2015, concerns about media freedom have grown due to increased government control over the media. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) criticised the public broadcaster's biased coverage in the 2020 Presidential elections, and the European Commission's recent Rule of Law Reports noted a lack of progress in ensuring fair media licensing and strengthening public service media independence.<sup>81</sup> Journalists face Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), charges for criminal defamation, and other legal constraints and pressures that hinder critical reporting.<sup>82</sup> Bureaucratic delays and procedural manipulation obstruct access to public information, often leaving requests unresolved for years.<sup>83</sup> With the legal framework failing to effectively address hate crimes and hate speech, selective prosecution and a lack of accountability for authorities is still an open wound for Polish society.<sup>84</sup> Government-controlled news and information outlets have contributed to media polarisation, exacerbating societal divisions.<sup>85</sup>

In 2021, PiS introduced a proposed change in the law regarding the free media, to prevent countries that are not members

of the European Economic Area from taking over or having influence over the Polish media. This proposition, known as "Lex TVN", received harsh criticism from Parliament perceiving a political agenda to influence broadcast media and prevent them from broadcasting critical content.

The proposal also implied that non-European stakeholders, such as American Discovery INC among others, would be disqualified from having a platform where independently sourced information and critique of the government could be provided.

OSCE's post-2020 presidential election report stated that Poland has deliberately "*failed to ensure balanced and impartial coverage*" by the public broadcasters.<sup>86</sup> Media regulators have additionally "*been targeted for political control, enabling the government to abuse the powers of licensing and investigations into complaints to intimidate, threaten and coerce independent media.*"<sup>87</sup>

It is important to note that even though regulations regarding media publications remain in place, PiS has managed to gradually incorporate SLAPPs, therefore contributing to a large majority of legal actions being "*initiated by politicians affiliated with the ruling alliance.*"<sup>88</sup>

At the same time, Poland has established a state commission to investigate Russian influence on its domestic security from 2007 to 2022. The commission has extensive powers to investigate the media, including a mandate to interrogate

80 *ibid*

81 Media Freedom at a Crossroads: Journalism in Poland faces uncertain future ahead of election, Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2023

82 Poland: Events of 2023. Human Rights Watch, 11 January 2024

83 Civic Space Report 2023 Poland, European Civic Forum | Civic Space Watch, 2023

84 Executive Accountability: Poland Report, Governance Indicators (SGI), 2022

85 *ibid*

86 Media Freedom at a Crossroads: Journalism in Poland faces uncertain future ahead of election, Media Freedom Rapid Response, 2023

87 *ibid*

88 *ibid*



journalists and access confidential sources. Critics, including the International Press Institute (IPI), warn that this poses a threat to press freedom and could be used to intimidate journalists critical of the government.<sup>89</sup>

The International Press Institute has called on Poland's Foreign Ministry to reconsider cutting funding for Belsat, a key Belarusian-language broadcaster, warning it could severely limit access to independent news for Belarusian and Russian speakers.<sup>90</sup>

Initially founded with the support of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), Belsat has for a long time remained the only independent media outlet that had a satellite broadcast in Belarus. In the summer of 2024, the budget was cut by 47%, Belsat's director was dismissed, and the MFA decided to integrate Belsat into the media infrastructure of TVP World and continue its work as a Polish channel for foreign audiences. Later, the management of Belsat reported that their website would no longer function at its previous pace and would only be updated occasionally.<sup>91</sup> The IPI and the European Centre for Press and Media

Freedom (ECPMF) suggested postponing the cuts to allow Belsat to find new funding sources.<sup>92</sup> This cut forms part of Poland's broader Development Cooperation Plan for 2024. However, due to political turmoil, TVP cannot co-finance Belsat. Independent Belarusian media, facing severe repression and being labelled as "extremist" by the Lukashenko regime, are struggling to survive financially, with some on the verge of closure.<sup>93</sup>

Despite a worrying political context for the population of Poland, it has provided favourable relocation conditions for Belarusians. Just as in Lithuania, Polish law allows the allocation of 1.5% of annual taxes to non-commercial initiatives of the taxpayers' choice. Following Lithuania, Poland started to issue humanitarian visas. It was one of the first countries to activate the process of issuing travel documents and alien passports to the Belarusians who had lost the possibility of updating their national IDs in 2023. The scope of total emigration to Poland is assessed as a minimum of 113,000 since 2020.<sup>94</sup> These numbers differ significantly for Russian citizens, as only 10,500 have come to Poland in recent years.<sup>95</sup>

89 Press freedom threatened by Poland's new commission on Russian influence, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 8 June 2023

90 Belarus Weekly: Poland cuts financing for exiled Belarusian media, putting survival of independent press at risk, Kyiv Independent, 22 March 2024

91 Телеканал "Белсат" сообщил о приостановке работы сайта (обновлено), Pozirk, 1 August 2024

92 ibid

93 ibid

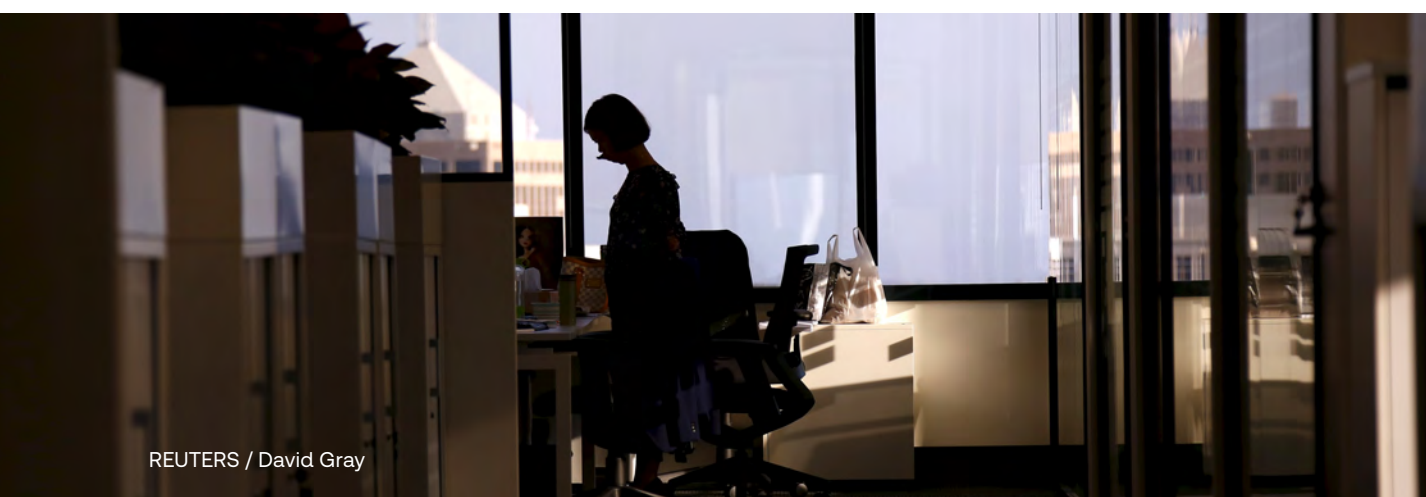
94 Дык колькі беларусаў з'ехала?, New Ideas Center, 8 March 2024

95 Mapy i dane statystyczne: Imigranci i służby migracyjne Polski, 2024

# Independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile: Profile, needs and challenges

While there is data on dozens of Belarusian and Russian media in exile, it remains challenging to provide an exact number of media that have relocated or been created by exiled journalists in the host countries at the focus of this study. This is related to several factors. Firstly, some independent media have not yet registered abroad and work as non-registered entities, or are registered in other host countries, such as Georgia or the Netherlands. Secondly, some independent media avoid openly discussing the country of their registration for security reasons.

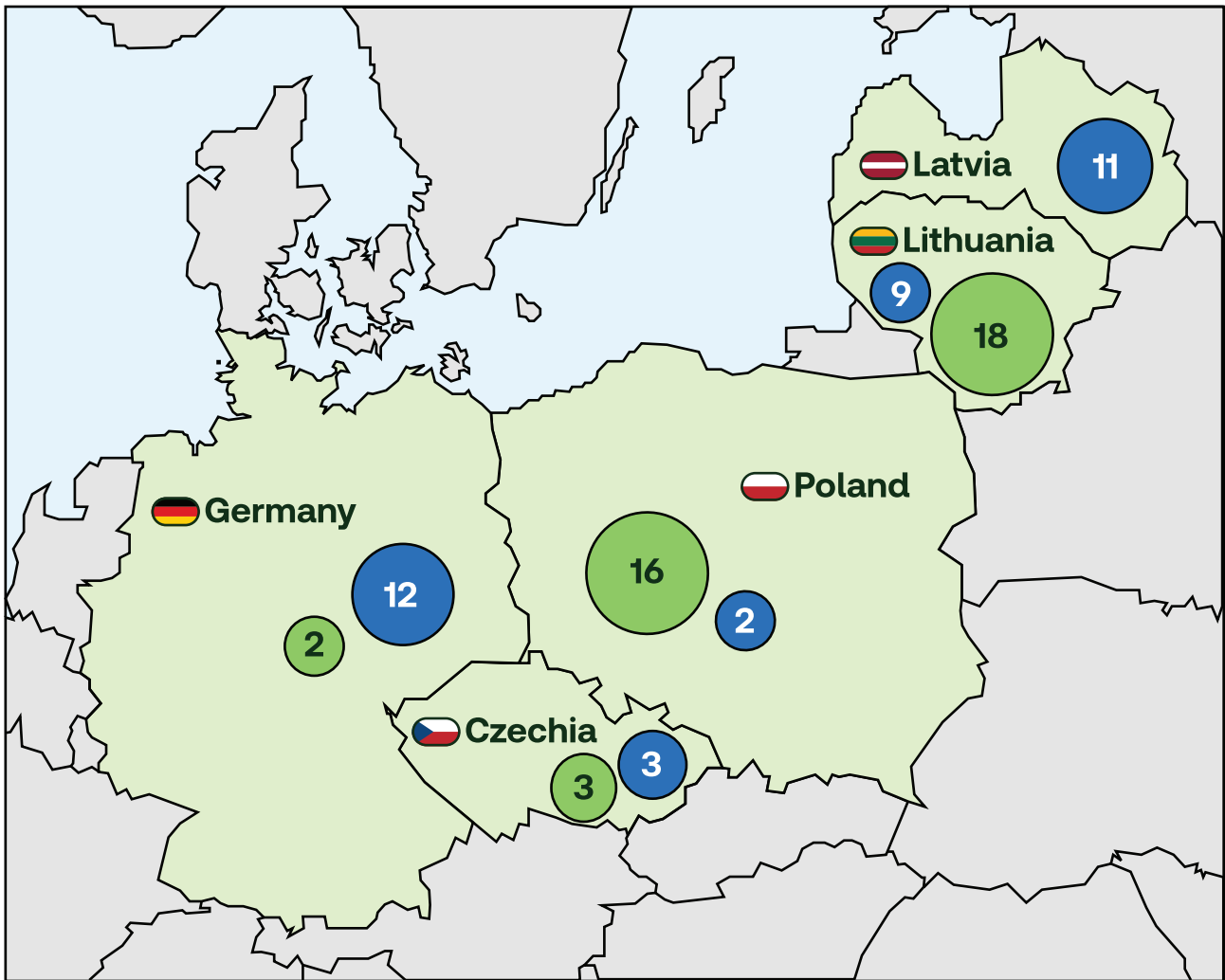
Overall, we have mapped 48 independent Belarusian exiled media and 81 independent Russian exiled media that partly or fully operate from one of the five focus countries. The Exhibit below (p. 17) includes active independent media that provide news coverage on Belarus or Russia and are fully or partially based in Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, or Poland. Life-style media, magazines and media that cover exclusively the news of the host country or diaspora agenda were excluded from the sample.



REUTERS / David Gray

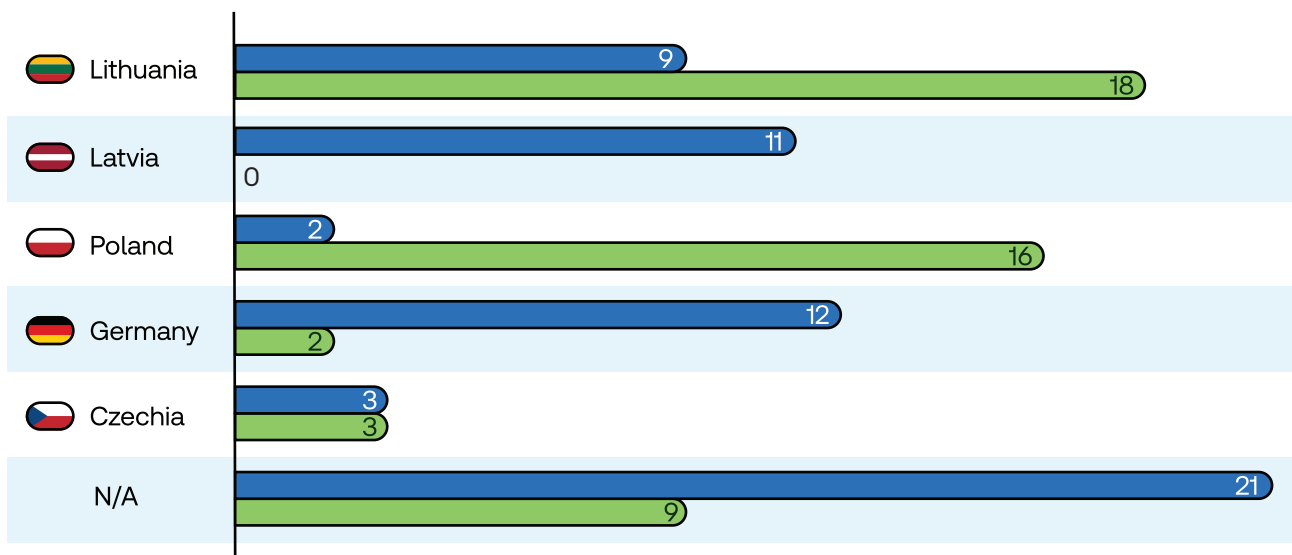
alt= A person standing at a desk in a quiet office, silhouetted against large windows with a cityscape in the background. The subdued lighting and modern office layout suggest a reflective or focused moment in a professional setting.

**Mapping out the Belarusian and Russian exiled media**



■ Exiled media from Russia

■ Exiled media from Belarus



alt= Exhibit 3: Map of Exiled Media Relocation Destinations

The map illustrates the primary host countries where exiled media from Belarus and Russia have relocated. Countries with larger numbers of relocated media are highlighted or marked with larger icons or bolder color indicators, with key destination countries including Poland, Czechia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Germany.

According to The Fix estimations, approximately ten independent Belarusian media outlets relocated between 2020 and 2022 while 23 relocated after 2022. For 13, the year of relocation remains unknown, and two were founded in exile. The distribution of dates looks similar for independent Russian media outlets: nine relocated between 2020 and 2022, and 50 after 2022. For 18, the year of relocation remains unknown, and three were founded in exile.

Belarusian and Russian media in exile include well-established teams, such as the Belarusian independent media Nasha Niva, Zerkalo, Euroradio and the Russian outlets Meduza, TV Rain and 7x7 Horizontal Russia. They also include new non-registered teams of journalists, such as the Russian independent media projects KomiDaily or Posle Media; and media projects founded in exile, such as the Plan B and MOST among the Belarusian media and The New Tab and Govorit NeMoskva among the Russian media.

Some independent Belarusian and Russian media had faced pressure from the political regimes in their home countries prior to 2020. As a measure to secure stable operation and resilience in case of crises, some had registered their entities abroad prior to actual relocation. This resulted in a quick and rather smooth relocation for the operational and administrative teams. Examples of such media include Nasha Niva from Belarus and TV Rain from Russia. A similar situation unfolded regarding media such as Belsat, which was initially registered abroad and operated in Belarus without a separate national registration.

Most of the mapped independent media have relocated from Belarus or Russia as a result of diminishing space for

freedom of speech and governmental repression against journalists in the form of aggressive media and information laws, criminal prosecutions of media employees and the designation of independent media as foreign agents or extremist groups, as well as safety concerns and intimidation.<sup>96,97</sup> The first wave of relocation of independent media from Belarus occurred in 2021, following the crackdown on the independent media sector in May–July 2021. The majority of large-scale independent Russian media relocated in 2022, right after Russia’s full-scale Ukraine invasion, the introduction of the so-called “anti-fake laws,” and the announcement of conscription of male citizens of Russia. Part of the independent media mapped out for this study continue to work with correspondents in the countries of origin, in rare cases even maintaining their registration in Belarus or Russia.

Among the independent exiled Russian media, the share of those that, prior to relocation, operated partly on a commercial basis was quite high. For the majority of the independent Belarusian media, advertising was the main commercial source of income, with a few methods related to other types of self-funding. Therefore, upon relocation, many Belarusian independent media lost their only access to commercial funding (advertising), which had previously made up a significant proportion of their income. Many independent Russian media, such as 7x7 Horizontal Russia and Bumaga, had worked with a commercial business model inside the country, including the management of community centres, hotels and co-working spaces, as well as cooperating with many businesses in the form of advertisements. They faced significant challenges in sustaining or re-establishing their business models abroad.

96 Silenced but Resilient: Belarusian Exiled Media since the 2020 Revolution, JX Fund, March 2024  
97 Sustaining Independence: Current State of Russian Media in Exile, JX Fund, November 2023

In relocation, some outlets decided to re-register their entities or launch a re-branding. In the Belarusian case, BelaPAN rebranded into Pozirk and TUT.by launched a new project in exile, Zerkalo. In the Russian case, an additional entity for Novaya Gazeta was launched in Europe. Rebranding or re-launching abroad was seen as one way to address the stigma directed against independent media by the Belarusian and Russian regimes, as well as a security measure to protect former journalists who continued to reside in the country. For some outlets, a partial re-branding was seen to offer a way to continue safely living abroad while reaching out to audiences within their country of origin. Some of the independent media that relocated to one of the host countries lost their capacity to operate within a year or two. For instance, while the Village Russia has continued to work from Poland, the Village Belarus announced its closure due to lack of resources, although it has maintained some social media channels.<sup>98</sup>

Some EXIM emerged in relocation as sister projects of media previously operating from the country of origin. For example, the Belarusian outlet MOST emerged as a project led by former Hrodna Life employees. Journalists who left their media organisation upon

relocation have also created separate independent media projects. For example, Belarusian YouTube news shows, such as Usual Morning, were started in exile. In the Russian case, a lot of independent media focused on successfully boosting investigative journalism paths.<sup>99</sup> Multiple projects and investigations addressed issues of corruption, army recruitment, sanctions violations and political elites and their families (e.g. The Insider, Meduza, Istories).

For both the Belarusian and Russian independent media communities, political developments in their countries of origin during the last few years have crystallised a set of opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, the independent exiled media received more freedom to report without a serious need to censor their content. On the other hand, this has also impacted their audience inside the countries of origin. Against the growing power of Belarusian and Russian propaganda, the EXIM are forced to compete for the audience, adjust their tone of voice and provide readers with safe means of access to their materials. In the following sections, based on the survey and interviews with independent journalists, we address other challenges and needs that exist across independent Belarusian and Russian media communities in exile.

98 Telegram Channel: The Village Беларусь

99 Sustaining Independence: Current State of Russian Media in Exile, JX Fund, November 2023

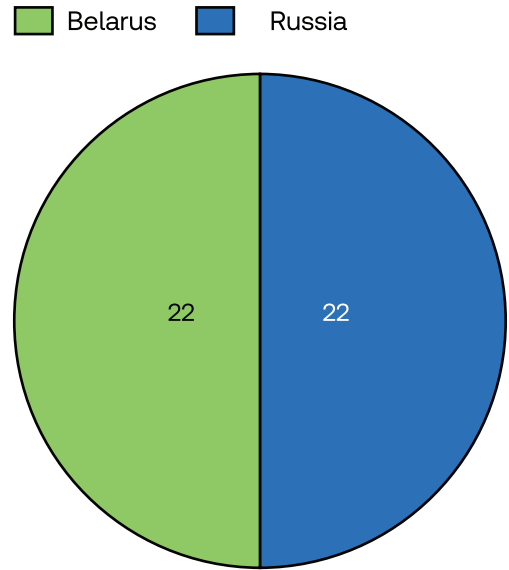
## Portrait of the survey respondents

The online survey was sent out to the independent exiled media mapped above, i.e. those that are either registered in or operate from one of the five host countries. The questionnaire generated 44 responses, 22 each from exiled Belarusian and Russian independent media outlets.

We received responses from three independent media registered in Czechia; three independent media registered in Latvia; 12 in Lithuania; one in Germany; nine in Poland; six registered in other countries, such as Georgia, Estonia, and Ukraine, but operating from one of the host countries; and ten not registered but operating from one of the host countries.

Exhibit 4

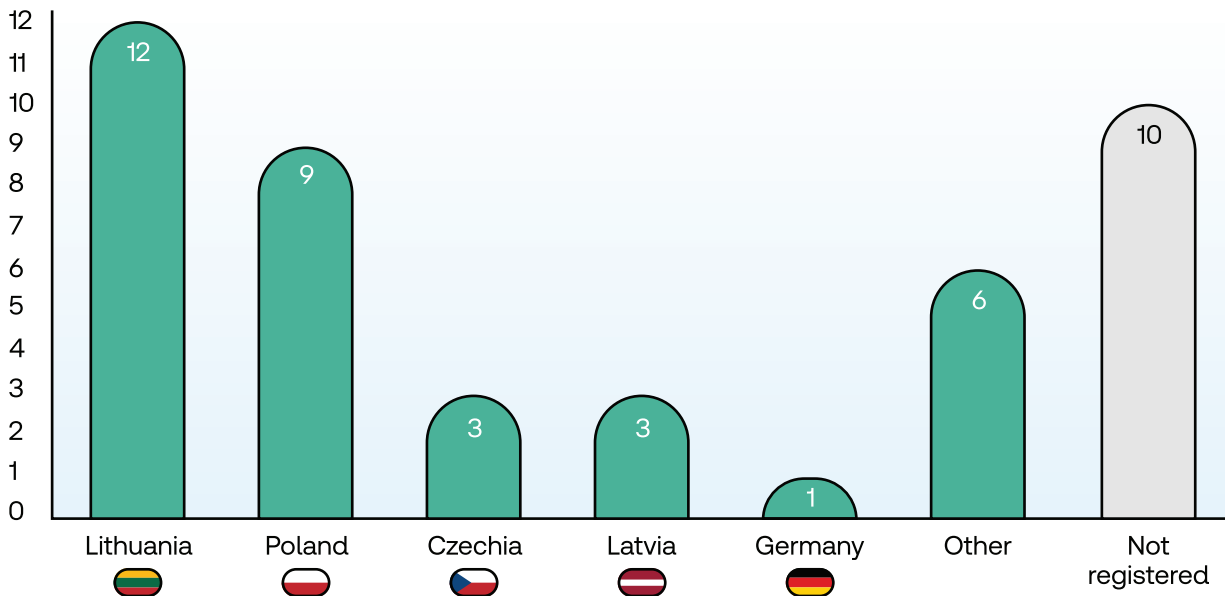
### Country of exiled media origin



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives)

Exhibit 5

### In which country is your media registered?



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: In which country is your media registered? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

alt= Exhibit 4: Origin of Independent Exiled Media  
A chart visualizes survey respondents of this study, indicating the number of independent exiled media from Belarus and Russia.

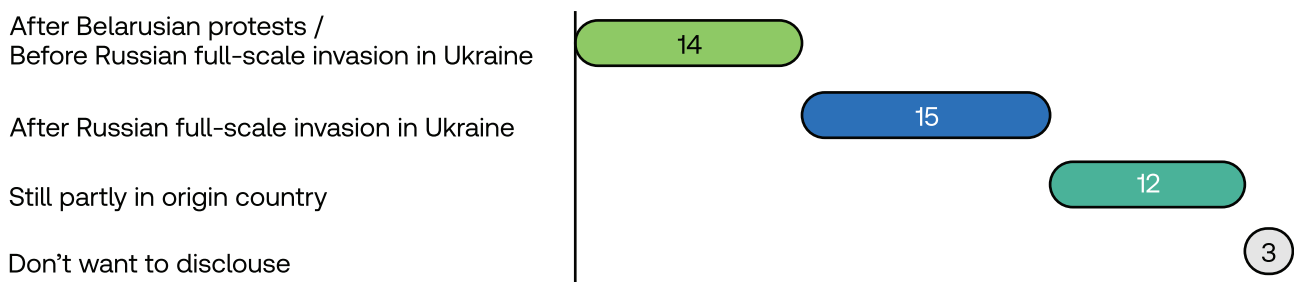
alt= Exhibit 5: Media Registration by Country  
This bar chart shows the countries where exiled media from Belarus and Russia have registered. Major registration hubs include Lithuania, Poland, Czechia, Latvia, and Germany.

Fifteen of the independent media organisations in the sample (ten Russian and five Belarusian) completely or partially relocated after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, or were established in one of the host countries by exiled journalists (e.g., the Belarusian media MOST and the Russian media Verstka).

Fourteen independent media outlets relocated between 2020 and 2022 (11 Belarusian and three Russian). 12 organisations indicated that part of their team is still in the country of origin. Mostly, this regarded independent Russian media, with eight organisations partly working from Russia and four having employees in Belarus. Three outlets didn’t want to share the year of their relocation.

Exhibit 6

### Period of relocation



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: When has your media relocated from Belarus / Russia? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

## Needs, conditions, and challenges for Belarusian and Russian independent media

In the survey, participants were asked to name the challenges they face working for the exiled independent media in their host country. When provided with multiple choices, the Belarusian independent media chose three top options: financial challenges, decreasing audience and outreach, and mental health-related issues. When asked to identify the main challenge, 73% highlighted financial challenges for the team, while none of the respondents selected mental health.

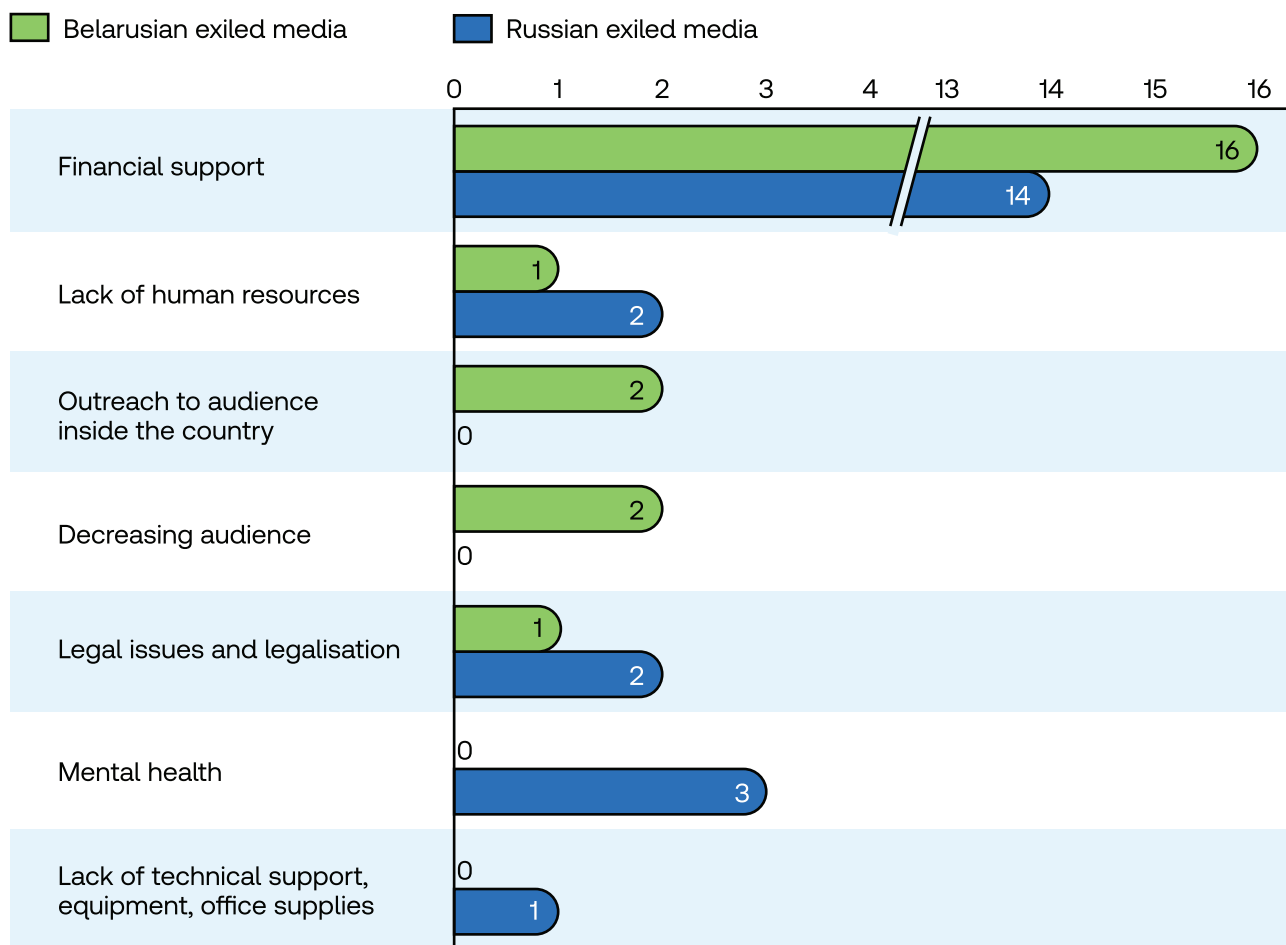
Similar dynamics were noted for their Russian counterparts, with most respondents from the independent Russian media in exile highlighting financial support (95.5%) and reaching an audience inside the country (73%). Third place was shared between mental health-related issues and legal and legalisation issues, both selected by 63.6% of respondents from Russian outlets. Prioritising one main challenge, the independent Russian media in exile also highlighted financial challenges.

alt= Exhibit 6: Period of Relocation

This chart illustrates the timing of relocation for Belarusian and Russian independent media, divided into three options: after the protests in Belarus but before the escalation of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, after Russian-Ukrainian conflict, and with some teams partially operating in their home country.

Exhibit 7

### Major challenges faced by Belarusian and Russian media in exile



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: What challenges do you as a media team most often face in your work? (select all that apply to you). No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

While respondents’ assessments of organisational conditions do not vary significantly between men and women, women rated their personal working conditions slightly lower than men. People who selected their gender as ‘other’ gave their personal working conditions only half the score that men gave – and only slightly above half the score that they gave their organisational conditions.

Assessments also differ depending on job role. The most positive assessment of organisational conditions is made by communication specialists, and the most

pessimistic by those who combine several roles, closely followed by journalists. Concerning the assessment of personal conditions, the most positive assessment comes from administrative and managerial employees, and the most pessimistic from journalists.

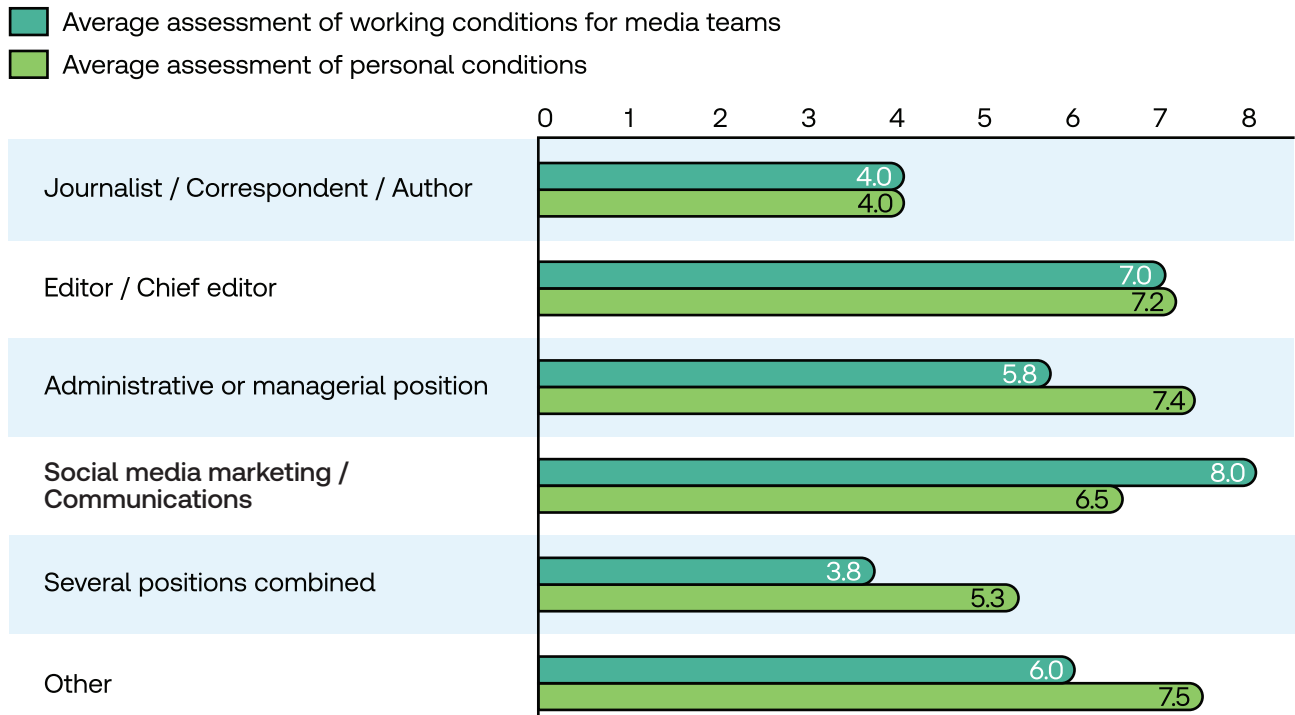
During the interviews, we focused on obtaining a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by the independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile. Below, we present an overview of their main challenges, needs and conditions.

alt= Exhibit 7: Challenges for Exiled Media  
A bar chart shows challenges faced by Belarusian and Russian independent exiled media, such as financial support, audience outreach, and lack of human resources. Financial support and lack of human resources were most significant, while technical support and mental health challenges were less prevalent.



Exhibit 8

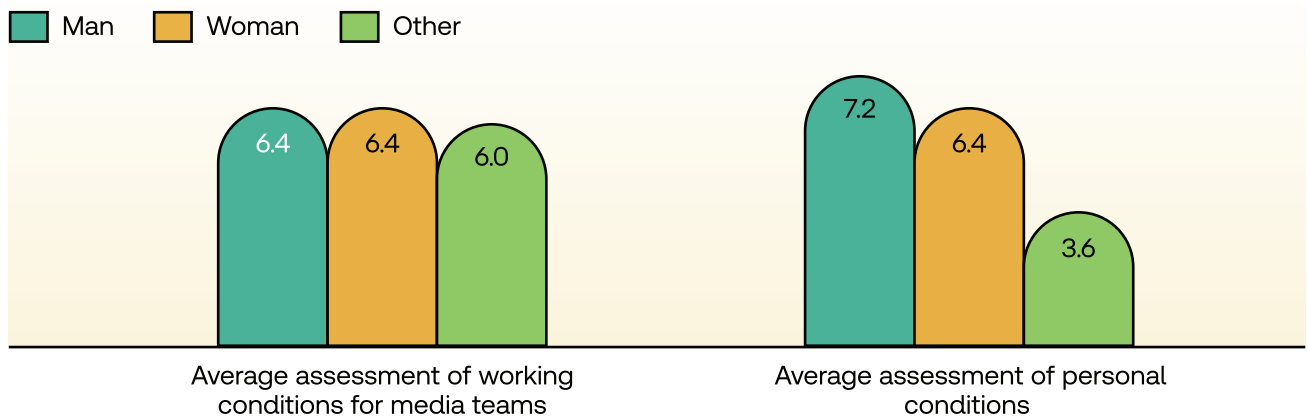
### Assessment of organisational and personal conditions in one's host country by role in media organisation



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: How do you rate the working conditions for your editorial office in the country of relocation? And how do you rate the working conditions in the relocation country for you personally? Answers were measured against the role of the person in their media organisation. No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Exhibit 9

### Assessment of organisational and personal conditions in one's host country by gender



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: How do you rate the working conditions for your editorial office in the country of relocation? And how do you rate the working conditions in the relocation country for you personally? Answers were measured against variable "gender." No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

alt= Exhibit 8: Working and personal conditions for independent exiled media and the roles in organisations. The chart visualises the assessment of working and personal conditions in the host countries based on the role in media. The highest assess of working conditions is made by Social media marketing and communications and the lowest by those who combine several positions.

alt= Exhibit 9: Working Conditions by gender. This chart provides gender-based assessments of organizational and personal conditions, showing similar ratings across genders. Males and females rated working and personal conditions similarly, with a slightly lower rating among respondents of other genders.

## Financial sustainability

Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile highlight financial support as the most burning issue for the operation of their media teams in exile. Overall, 30 out of 44 survey respondents identified financial support as a major challenge. This was reflected in the 17 interviews conducted with representatives of the Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile, with every respondent also highlighting financial sustainability as a central challenge.

Interviewees focused on three main issues related to financial support: criticising the grant-based and project-based models, stressing a lack of operational and flexible funding, and problematising the idea of alternative business models for exiled independent media.

Upon relocation, most organisations transferred to a grant-based model of operation. This had a significant impact on strategic planning and employee sustainability. Instead of long-term planning, the financial situation now necessitates a constant search for additional resources, adjusting to a project call's aims and goals, as well as performing new functions, such as reporting and administering projects according to various donor templates.

*“I would be very happy if there was one player, and they gave me a larger amount than different ones who give a little. Well, simply because it would be easier to manage it all, but since this is not the first year we are in such a system, I understand that it will never happen,”<sup>100</sup> — one of the media responded.*

Additionally, some respondents are willing to shorten application processing times to avoid funding holes that put their

organisations in a vulnerable situation. One of the challenges related to the new system is the limited possibility of obtaining long-term funding. As one respondent told us: *“This is a constant problem; it has been relevant to us since the first day we started in exile.”*

At the beginning of their operation in exile, many independent media received emergency support from multiple donors. But as they settled into operations in their host country, this time-limited emergency support ceased to apply, and they were obliged to gradually shift towards project-based funding.

One unresolved issue is the lack of finances for the human resources necessary to maintain a new model of operation. For example, interviewees mentioned a lack of resources for project managers, legal advisors and administrative personnel. Along with growing living costs in the host countries, compared to the countries of origin, the operational and administrative burden often does not fall into either emergency or project support, leading to funding shortfalls. Interviewees also highlighted the uncertainty related to the future financial situation:

*“In 2024, there were fewer grants. Firstly, since 2022, everyone rushed to help Ukraine. The Belarusian topic is losing attention. There is less [perceived] need to support small media. This year, we received much less funding than in previous years. We are all waiting for the US elections because American donors are quite large, and they are frozen and waiting for the elections to take place.”*

The independent media representatives' opinion on the desired forms of financial support can be summarised as a need

<sup>100</sup> Quotes from the interviews are edited to remove filler words and, in some cases, shortened without a distorting of the original meaning.

for a) flexible funding that is not tied to specific goals but allows the organisation to distribute finances according to their needs; b) long-term funding that allows media teams to cover operational costs for a prolonged period, at least a year.

One respondent told us: *“For the stable work of the editorial office, it needs to have a budget for a year, for two, for three, to understand how to develop, that is, to have this stability, which is very much lacking.”*

Another popular opinion regards a full or partial transfer to business models that would secure at least some income from commercial projects. While some of the examples, such as the Russian independent media in exile, Paper, have successfully continued their commercial activity, which allows them to cover a significant share of the operational costs of the team, other media express doubts that business models in exile are suitable for them. As most of the independent Belarusian media are designated as extremists, it appears risky for Belarusian-based businesses to place advertisements with them. At the same time, the share of Belarusian business abroad is relatively small and would only target small audiences, resulting in insignificant financial impact. Businesses in the host countries have limited interest in advertising in independent exiled media that produces content for audiences inside other countries. One of the Russian respondents expressed the same thought, flagging that many donors and partners push them to establish new business models while also requiring them to work for audiences inside Russia. According to one respondent, this diversification of goals requires two separate teams *“Because you need to somehow look for money at the same time as working in media and working at another job so*

*that you have money to feed yourself and pay for housing.”*

CSOs that took part in the research have problematised the competition among the exiled independent media, including across the region, with one CSO chief executive observing:

*“I think many media workers are distracted by this fight to survive financially. So, it doesn't allow them to focus on quality and improve.”*

Additionally, some of the CSOs echo the opinion of independent media in exile, arguing that business models will secure a maximum of 10% funding for the media, leaving 90% of costs uncovered. Furthermore, some CSOs believe that the requirement of business models is less reasonable and is rather a *“new trend in the donor landscape.”*

When discussing commercialisation and diversification of income sources, there is a clear difference between the independent Belarusian and Russian media. This is also supported by an earlier JX Fund report, which highlights that while in 2023, about 20% of the independent Russian exiled media budgets came from commercial sources, the respective share for independent Belarusian media was only 15%. Similarly, financial support from the readership accounted for 11% of the total budget for Russian outlets, but only 3% for Belarusian outlets.<sup>101</sup> Some of the independent Russian media are actively testing different business models, such as the creation of their own VPN and paid subscriptions.

In contrast, independent Belarusian exiled media seem to depend on donors' money much more. This is reflected in the limited understanding of business models by the Belarusian respondents in this study.

101 Silenced but Resilient: Belarusian Exiled Media since the 2020 Revolution, JX Fund, March 2024

While the independent Belarusian media refer to subscriptions on Patreon and other types of donations from the audiences, the independent Russian media interpret commercialisation more broadly and more creatively. While independent Russian media still has ties with Russian businesses inside the country, the Belarusian regime has completely criminalised any relations with independent media. Belarusian respondents highlighted that their 'extremist' status limits access to Belarusian businesses, preventing them from developing new business models, as *"There are no doubts that none of the Belarusian businesses would work with us; moreover, we succeeded to so far work with only one Belarusian business abroad, because they still have clients in Belarus."*

Others see it as impossible due to the format of the media operation:

*"Well, it's just that commercial monetisation does not fit into our concept of media in any way."*

One of the respondents explains that another problem *"Is that the Belarusian reader does not want to pay for content. Colleagues from other media collect money through Patreon and other services, but this is not for work; this is to stay afloat for two months."*

Some independent media have expressed an understanding of commercialisation but, at the same time, pointed to their lack of knowledge on how to develop in this direction:

*"We want to somehow learn how to make money. This is extremely important for us because we don't have normal sponsors."*

Others highlight that they have a successful diversification of revenue that follows a threefold model: donations, selling merchandise and side-line services, such as consultations, trainings, entertainment

events or membership systems. One illustration of a functioning business model, maintained by the independent Russian exiled media Paper,<sup>102</sup> is provided below:

*"Historically, we are a commercial organisation. We were resilient before the war. These were not some fantastic profits, but at the same time, we felt good. We have a balanced business model; we make money from advertising, events, and marketing. We provide consulting and corporate services. Basically, these are people inside Russia. We also make money from advertising from corporate services for companies approximately the same as us, that is, international companies with predominantly Russian roots. In Tbilisi, we have a co-working space with a bar and community things; we have product departments, marketing, development, and design. Inside Russia, we are deprived of the opportunity to earn money from advertising because we are foreign agents, but nevertheless, some advertisers still remain. Outside of Russia, we have advertisers for our Georgian media, which we are gradually growing. We also launched YouTube Production; they have already started selling there too, a very small check, but nevertheless."*

Hence, multiple needs related to the financial support of the independent exiled media concern the idea of providing a core budget, flexible and long-term assistance, and infrastructural, financial support for media teams. Additionally, several respondents expressed a desire to be kept informed of donors' evolving priorities, allowing them to adjust their planning and applications for funding. As one of the respondents suggested, this could be done through offline coordination meetings with the donor community, such as the BIIM (Belarusian International Implementors Meeting), which is held annually for Belarusian civil society and political and media actors.

102 Когда кажется, что ничего нельзя изменить, начните с маленького шага, Бумага

## Legal and administrative support

With the relocation of exiled media to new host countries, media teams had to address multiple legal issues, from obtaining work permits for individuals to registering and maintaining the work of their organisations. Interviewees highlight challenges in both these areas: The legalisation of private individuals and the legal operation of their media organisations. Depending on the status of the exiled independent media – registered or non-registered – the burden of legalisation also varies.

Conditions for the legalisation of independent media employees differ depending on the country of origin and the country of relocation. As mentioned above, the possession of a Russian passport often triggers complications in the process of obtaining work permits in host countries.

*“In the first six months after the start of the war, I immediately formulated for myself that we would have difficulties with the red passport. Perhaps all your life and therefore you don’t have to wait, nothing good, and you need to reduce your expectations. This is the mantra,” — one of the media responded.*

At the same time, respondents operating from Lithuania reported that the support they received from CSOs, especially Freedom House, in the form of recommendation letters and close contact with the relevant ministries, allowed them to receive relatively positive treatment compared to ordinary Russian passport holders. However, the same respondents highlighted that support letters were not issued to all exiled journalists. The procedure for receiving aid remains highly opaque and complicated, and rather dependent on factors unknown to the independent media themselves.

One Russian respondent reported that the conditions of relocation have improved over recent years, reflected in Lithuanian migration services issuing longer work permits – with documents now valid for three years compared to just one year in 2022. However, Belarusian respondents based in Lithuania indicate the opposite: For them the conditions for legalisation have worsened, with new requirements introduced for Belarusian citizens and decreasing support from Lithuanian CSOs. The complexity of obtaining Lithuanian residence permits has pushed some of their media teams to Poland.

*One respondent told us: “We chose Poland because it is the country with the easiest path to legalisation for Belarusians. Some journalists are legalised through international protection, some through humanitarian residence permits.”*

In Poland, Belarusian media employees report longer processing times for their applications, but the number of negative decisions remains low. The representative of Belarus in Focus explained that as many independent media relocated in 2020 or 2021, their employees are now entering the phase of extending their documents in Poland, which requires different legal input. After their initial legalisation, based on a humanitarian visa, they must now engage with the complicated process of transferring to a working visa. Additionally, respondents point to the long waiting times for submitting their applications to renew their residence permits: *“There are problems with legalisation in terms of time; you have to wait for a very long time in order to get an appointment to submit an application. The queue has now stretched out.”*

Personal legalisation in Germany also meets criticism from journalists in terms of the length of the process.

Complicated and analogue application processes are compounded by long waiting times for obtaining the papers.

Belarusian media workers face a unique and complex situation due to the expiration of Belarusian passports. Belarusian embassies stopped issuing new passports abroad on 4th September 2023, and most independent media workers cannot risk travelling to Belarus to renew their passports. This leads to another stage of legalisation related to obtaining the travel document in countries like Poland and Lithuania or seeking asylum in the host countries. For the independent Russian media in exile, the option of renewing their passports in Russian embassies remains. However, respondents report long queues for embassy appointments.

Another burning issue related to legalisation in the host countries regards the registration of media organisations. As indicated in Exhibit 5 (p. 20) above, a quarter of the respondents' media organisations are not registered yet. All of these are independent Russian media in exile.

Some exiled Russian outlets operate under registrations in various countries, ensuring the 'legal diversity' for their media team. Other independent Russian exiled media still possess registration in Russia, along with the status of foreign agents. For the independent Belarusian media, this possibility was closed down in 2021. Following the crackdown on free press, most independent media organisations were forced to shut down or did it proactively to avoid repression. A somewhat complicated situation surrounds 'network media' such as Mediazona. The Belarusian office of Mediazona is registered together with the Russian editorial office in Lithuania, while the Belarusian team works from Poland. This makes it

complicated for Belarusian employees to apply for a Lithuanian humanitarian visa and leaves them no other choice but to apply for asylum in Poland.

The majority of the independent media that we interviewed chose to register as not-for-profit organisations. However, as they progress with legalisation, taking steps such as opening a private or organisational bank account, many struggle to negotiate general regulations in the host countries regarding this matter. One Russian respondent highlights that while the majority of their team in Lithuania were able to open a bank account, their family members were constantly denied that service due to their citizenship.

Despite these difficulties, when responding to an open question in the survey about one problem that they have been able to solve, most of the respondents mentioned the issue of legalisation.

*"Thanks to the system of cooperation with local administration bodies, the situation is currently resolved with legal residence and the right to work," – respondent from Belarusian exiled media.*

*"There were problems with documents, but at the moment, everything seems to be fine with all team members with documents," – respondent from Russian exiled media.*

The legal and administrative needs of the exiled independent media also include free or discounted access to relevant legal consultants for solving individual and organisational issues.

Exiled media employees from both countries have also highlighted the need for advocacy regarding the legalisation of media workers.

## Operations and management

Upon relocation, every EXIM was pushed to re-establish their operational processes. The natural effects of relocation, reflected in geographical splits within the media teams, have resulted in a shortage of competent and relevant personnel, and a lack of working facilities and access to reporting in the country of origin, leading to growing operational costs.

Closely intertwined with the challenges related to financial sustainability, small and medium exiled media struggle to

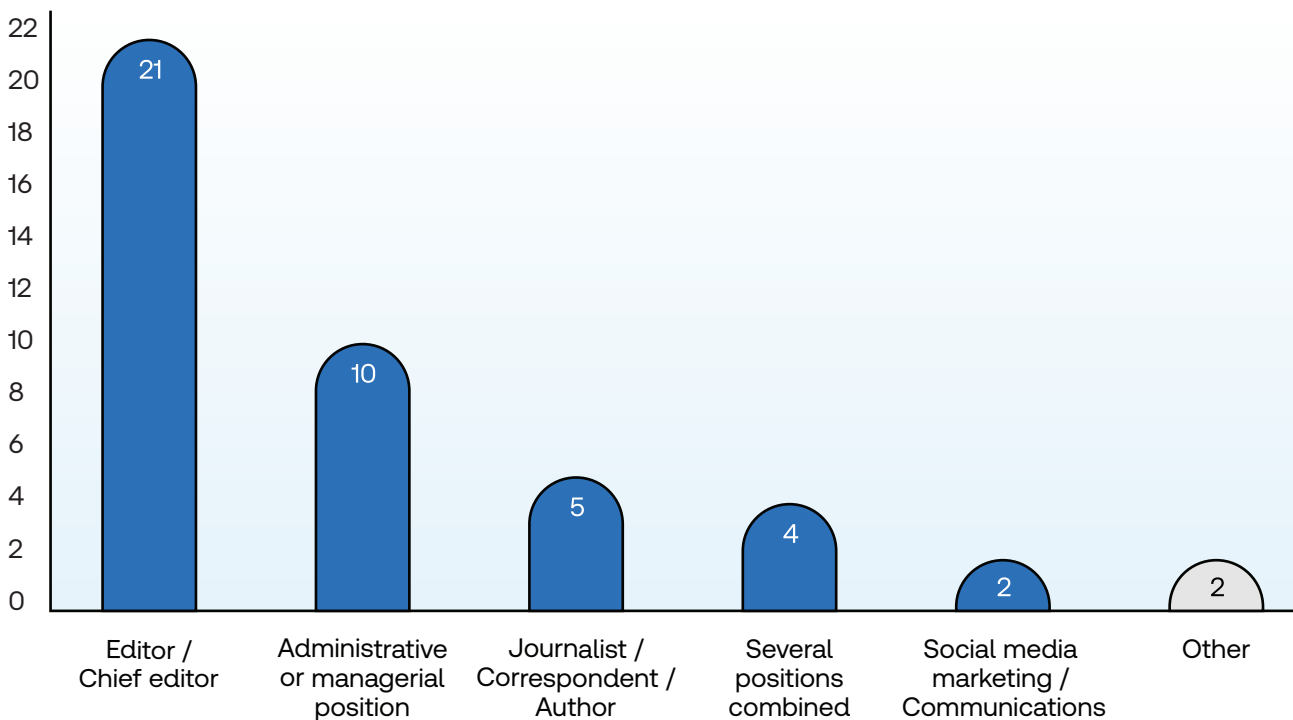
secure sufficient staff, sometimes pushing them to combine several roles.

Even though only four survey respondents indicated that they combined roles (see Exhibit 10 below), the interviews revealed that the human resources shortage is somewhat more significant.

As one interviewee explains: *“Unfortunately, now, in exiled media people often do not do what they studied for. You’re not only an editor, but you also run a website and social media.”*

Exhibit 10

### Roles within media teams



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: What position do you hold? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

The interviews underscore two key factors that lead to the shortage of human resources. Firstly, a failure to provide adequate adaptation support to the newly relocated team members, who often suffer from burnout and trauma. Relocation often leads to “identity crisis”

and “constant doubts in choosing the right path for a future in exile.” Secondly, as the costs of living rise – costs which usually fall out with donors’ support to media organisations – media workers seek alternative livelihoods.

Exhibit 10: Distribution of Roles within Media Teams  
This bar chart presents the roles held by respondents of the survey, including Journalists / Correspondents, Editors, Administrative staff, Social media marketing / Communications, and combined roles.

*“We are losing very good personnel who could come in, refresh the team, add a little professionalism, bring a new look and so on. They just work in IT. These people will work in international organisations because it is simply more profitable for them,” — one of the media responded.*

Both the Belarusian and the Russian independent media face a shortage of staff in exile, but also in their countries of origin. This is closely linked to security concerns for the reporters and correspondents, as well as for administrative personnel. Labels of foreign agents in Russia and extremist formations in Belarus become a barrier for many of those who chose to remain in the country. For the independent Belarusian media, it remains an almost unsolvable issue. However, for some of the independent Russian media who cover regional news, there is still an open window when it comes to hiring local correspondents in Russia, including some who reside within the EU and travel to Russia for content collection.

For exiled Russian independent media, working with correspondents inside Russia has been crucial in obtaining information from the country. However, local employees and freelancers in-country, especially those working for independent media that highlight regional developments, generate significant additional workload for newsrooms in order to ensure these correspondents’ security and to manage administrative and financial relations with them. For independent Belarusian media in exile, working with local correspondents remains almost impossible due to high security risks. At the same time, large media outlets, such as Nasha Niva or Zerkalo, still preserve their network of local sources who work for the government and law enforcement services, and are prepared to share information anonymously.

Respondents also reveal several

difficulties related to hiring new personnel abroad. Firstly, exiled citizens of Belarus and Russia find work in the independent exiled media less attractive. As one of the respondents suggests: *“People from European universities do not see the need to connect their lives with journalism in exile.”* Secondly, those who are interested in pursuing their journalistic careers lack relevant formal or non-formal education and practice: *“There are editorial offices that have their own training. That is, they take someone with minimal knowledge. And then they have a system for how they prepare their employees. But only very large media can afford this.”* For independent Russian media, the shortage of human resources is less acute. Belarusian independent media representatives highlight that, compared to Russian and Ukrainian media, Belarusian outlets have access to far fewer interested and competent people in exile.

In the independent Belarusian media community, there have been some attempts to tackle the issue by organising short-term education and connecting new professionals with media teams. For example, the Belarusian Association of Journalists and Belarus in Focus have created educational labs where interested Belarusians in exile undergo intensive training and meet with media teams.

However, as the education organisers highlight, this is not systematic training, and its organisation requires additional resources, which they lack. Within the Russian media community, The New Tab and Project Glush offer services that connect the independent exiled media with interested correspondents in Russia and abroad. However, these initiatives are insufficient to compensate for the increasing lack of newsroom personnel. Another aspect of the staff shortage problem concerns managerial personnel. As the exiled independent media turn to a new model of financial support, most



funding is project-based and requires the competencies of skilled project managers who can strengthen fundraising. This also raises media teams' operational costs. For many independent media organisations, this donor dependent operation is new, and they are still establishing routines regarding fundraising and project management. Most of the independent media teams interviewed for this study have addressed the issue through learning by doing, with staff such as media managers and administrative personnel taking on the roles of project managers and fundraisers. However, this is highly problematic for media organisations:

*“Journalism is one thing, but management – is another; a journalist is not a manager. Professional managers who are ready and willing to join exiled media are gold. And there are not enough such people, and few people prepare them; practically no one prepares them.”*

Some journalists broached the idea of a training course for project managers, jointly organised by implementors and donors.

Despite the human resources and management challenges, several exiled independent media from Russia have successfully managed hybrid teams of people located in numerous countries.

As one of the media representatives mentions: *“Over the years, we have learned to work at a distance. We have people in at least nine countries, plus our local correspondents in Russia. This, of course, is very different from the past, when we all had been working in one office.”*

Another interviewee outlined an operational need around the provision of technical equipment, offices and studios for YouTube shows and podcasts. However, most of the respondents felt that this need has decreased with time as, for example, media hubs in Riga and Berlin, and media project studios in Warsaw, have provided space for content production.

However, the costs for content production abroad have grown, reflecting the increased costs for the services of personnel with the technical skills for audio and video content production.

## Adaptation and wellbeing

Wellbeing and mental health issues present a significant challenge for exiled media. With adaptation, legalisation and financial pressures in new conditions, it is not surprising that our surveys found mental health to be one of the three biggest challenges for operations in exile.

Uncertainty is a major trigger for continued problems with mental health among exiled independent media. For some, this relates to uncertainty regarding their return to their home countries. For others, it relates to a low or unstable income that makes it hard for people to see a future

for themselves in the media sector. Respondents in this research appreciated various types of assistance provided, such as therapy sessions, retreats and recreational holidays, as well as assistance with paying bills for medical care. However, many repeated a major argument:

*“It is necessary to understand that donors who want to provide psychological assistance should also think about how much funding, in general, they want to give to the media, so that the people who work there do not feel as they do now.”*

The lack of funding pushes independent media teams to overload their employees with additional working hours in order to maintain operation:

*“We have fired people and increased the number of working hours. Sometimes, I have to work 20 hours on weekends because I can’t push correspondents, social media marketing specialists and journalists to work on weekends, but the content needs to be published,”* notes an editor from an exiled Belarusian media organisation.

Besides mental health issues directly related to their work in the media, independent exiled media professionals also have to adapt to life in a new country. This often includes time searching for accommodation, schools and kindergartens for children, and learning another language. Combined with growing work hours, these additional commitments complicate and overwhelm exiled media employees.

At the same time, our interviews reveal that most respondents are well aware of where to request urgent assistance, such as therapists and team retreats. Additionally, many independent media organisations have used the opportunity of team retreats with recreational goals. However, respondents highlighted that on their return from retreats, two or three

working days are sufficient for feelings of anxiety and burnout to return.

This is the reason why one large independent Belarusian media organisation decided not to invest resources into organisational retreats and recreational activities, but instead inform their employees of opportunities for assistance at the individual level. Finally, those who have personally sought mental health assistance from CSOs noted that such support is only short-term in nature. The need to deal with mental health challenges requires a long-term plan, which ultimately lies in the hands of media employees.

To summarise, the wellbeing and adaptation needs of the independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile centre on the following three areas. Firstly, independent exiled media require systematic and centralised access to medical care that includes long-term therapy sessions, hotline support and psychological assistance for their families. Some respondents suggested the idea of centralised country-based medical care for media employees. Secondly, media professionals would benefit from greater certainty, which could be ensured by long-term funding and legalisation. Thirdly, a sense of community, in the form of regular meetings with other independent media teams who face similar challenges and may share experiences, would also be beneficial.

## Physical and digital security

During the interviews, respondents placed less emphasis on needs related to digital and physical security. Firstly, independent exiled media believe, prior to relocation, they acquired competencies and established routines in their countries of origin that “suffice to address the main security concerns in exile.” In particular, by 2024,

most independent media professionals claim to have learned how to cope with digital threats at the individual and organisational levels. At the same time, earlier findings from the JX Fund report indicate that at least 45% of journalists working abroad face various threats and risks.<sup>103</sup>

Some respondents remain uncertain about their physical safety in their host country. For example, the March 2024 attack on Alexei Navalny's aide Leonid Volkov in Vilnius brought new concerns for the independent Russian media operating from Lithuania. Germany-based Russian journalist in exile Elena Kostyuchenko, allegedly poisoned in 2023 in Munich, has highlighted the growing threats for activists and journalists abroad.<sup>104</sup> Independent Russian media in exile also mention that they have suspected physical surveillance. Since 2023, there have been at least seven known security breaches where Belarusian and Russian journalists in exile have been targeted with Pegasus spyware on their devices.<sup>105</sup>

The issue is even more pressing for correspondents within the countries of origin.

For example, ensuring the security of Russian local reporters is a precondition for continuing to receive content from inside the country. Editors of some independent Russian media in exile believe that their cooperation with local correspondents will reach a crisis point as the regime increases the costs of working for media organisations labelled 'foreign agents'.

CSOs have provided extensive security trainings and education to journalists and media teams. These organisations highlight physical and digital security training as one of the key areas of support provided to the independent media in exile. However, it is important to note that during the surveys and interviews carried out for this study, this issue was not highlighted a priority need by EXIM representatives.

## Product, tech and digital support

With the Belarusian and Russian regimes' growing investment in the development of digital infrastructure and work on digital platforms,<sup>106</sup> independent exiled media have needed to tackle another barrier to reaching their audiences. In particular, respondents explain that the algorithmic policies of companies such as Meta, Apple, Google, and ByteDance result in algorithms favouring content from the state media while shadowing content from the independent media. On one hand, loyal audiences of independent media already follow their content on available platforms, using VPN services and other means of secure access. On the other hand, the algorithmic infrastructure of

social media and search platforms limits EXIM's access to new audiences.

Since early August 2024, the playback speed of videos on YouTube in Russia has slowed "to the point that videos can no longer be viewed."<sup>107</sup> The impact was a 35% fall in YouTube's viewership in Russia within just one month.<sup>108</sup> The TSPU<sup>109</sup> censorship technology utilised to slow down the playback speed also has the capacity to block VPN protocols and deny access to webpages recognised as undesirable. This is a significant challenge for the Russian independent media sector that will, in the near future, require the development of new

104 Уже не «Новичок»: Что известно о новой волне отравлений журналистов и активистов в Европе, The Insider, 15 August 2023  
105 «Давайте-ка пойдем, не шпионы ли они», Meduza, 30 May 2024  
106 Alesia Rudnik; Co-option of Technology: Digital Repression and Legitimation Strategies of the Belarusian Regime. Communist and Post-Communist Studies 2024  
107 Russia slows YouTube's playback speed, jeopardising right to information, Reporters Without Borders (RSF), 9 August 2024  
108 Telegram Channel: Телеканал Дождь  
109 TSPU – 'Technical Devices to Combat Threats', a Russian internet censorship system

products and outreach strategies. Some independent media have already proposed solutions to overcome the YouTube slowdown. For example, TV Rain launched an extension for the Google Chrome browser, Potok, that grants users inside Russia free two-hour access to YouTube.<sup>110</sup>

There have been multiple attempts to overcome the potential blocking of EXIM content in Belarus and Russia, elaborates one of the CSOs: *“There have been so many attempts to reach out to them [YouTube and Google]. And even if you do manage to talk to them, there is simply no reaction. This is a very big challenge.”* The Belarusian case reveals a successful example that is, however, not yet scaled up to cover the whole independent media sector. Specifically, Belarus in Focus, in cooperation with Zerkalo, has created a technical solution for storing the web addresses of independent exiled media on Google and Amazon cloud services, making it practically impossible for the Belarusian authorities to block these sites. Previously, the Belarusian regime, after labelling the independent media as extremist, blocked all new independent media webpages. However, this solution is currently available only to six independent exiled media. It may be extended to 12 by the end of 2024. The complexity of this technical solution lies in the sophisticated technical and security audit procedures that independent media have to undergo to be considered a part of Google and Amazon's cloud.

Another growing challenge regards outreach to audiences in the countries of origin and preservation of the accumulated readership. Respondents highlight that the donor community has been responsive towards the challenge of audience outreach by, for example, measuring engagement not only through quantitative

indicators but also by requesting qualitative information, such as the length of the views and viewers' engagement. As some of the CSOs highlight, the minimum expectation from the independent exiled media is to preserve the existing audience rather than increase it: *“We understand that it's not possible nowadays to increase those audiences, but at least to maintain those audiences and give them that flexibility to build on a new platform or advance their platforms that are able to target these audiences inside the countries.”*

Another challenge in reaching audiences lies in EXIM's status as foreign agents or extremists, which creates safety concerns among the audiences and potential correspondents.

*“It's a typical situation when you are trying to create a story from abroad, and your sources refuse to answer you just because you are toxic media. Toxic media for the authorities, for the autocratic regime. So, their main problem, their main challenge, is that they are not inside the country. Of course, it's because of safety because they have to protect their people, but there is a price for this.”* – respondent from a CSO.

Additionally, some respondents point to the fact that the geographical distance between an audience and the media creates distrust: *“In autocratic countries, there is a big distrust of media who left, because of propaganda and also because of this feeling that you left the country, and you left us in a bad situation.”*

A peculiarity of the independent Belarusian media in exile lies in a relatively high level of trust towards independent media,<sup>111</sup> while the central problem concerns reaching disengaged audiences.

<sup>110</sup> «Дождь» выпустил ускоритель для ютуба под названием «Поток», Meduza, 29 August 2024

<sup>111</sup> Belarusians' media consumption and attitude towards reforms: The results of a public opinion poll conducted between 24 January and 3 February 2023, Chatham House | The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2023

Some respondents highlight that their focus is on neutral audiences that require a specific approach in terms of content production, such as “news completely cleansed from any political content.” For some media, the production of entertaining content appears natural and successful, as they develop their sub-brands on TikTok and YouTube (see, for example,

the YouTube shows *Maksimalno*,<sup>112</sup> *Polchasika Kardio*,<sup>113</sup> and *Obsuzhdaem*<sup>114</sup>).

Finally, when asked about the formats of product and tech assistance, respondents propose training on how digital platforms function, how to expand on YouTube and how to integrate AI into the daily work of independent media teams.

## Summary of the key needs of the exiled independent media

As the sections above indicate, multiple needs exist across Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile. Some of the needs are seen as core for the continuing operation of these media, such as financial support and legal security. Other needs are formulated as secondary or co-dependant on the core needs.

As the degree and prioritisation of particular needs depend on the size of the media organisation, its previous capacity, host country conditions for legalisation and operation, and established contacts, our survey demonstrates that there is no correlation between the media relocation year and the type of needs. In turn, as shown in Exhibit 7 (p. 22), most independent media are united in seeing financial support as a core and primary need. Respondents connect financial support with every other challenge described, from mental health to operational processes and audience outreach.

Many needs among the independent Belarusian and Russian media are identical. However, through the research, some aspects related to the country of origin stood out:

**1. The legalisation needs of Belarusian and Russian citizens differ.** While EU countries have introduced more restrictions on Russian passport holders so far, the processing of Belarusian applications for residency permits has been complicated by the Lukashenko regime banning passport-related work in Belarusian embassies abroad. In practice, this means that, when their passport expires, independent Belarusian media employees cannot renew their passports, which are the basis on which humanitarian or work permits are issued, outside Belarus. This pushes Belarusian media workers to seek asylum and apply for a travel document, which has only been issued by a few countries so far. Exiled Russian media workers are still able to renew their passports abroad. So while Russian media professionals need support in legalisation in terms of the host country's documents, their Belarusian counterparts also face difficulties in relation to their own national documents.

**2. A growing fear of favouritism among the Belarusian and smaller exiled media.** Russian small and niche independent media express a fear of losing their financial support as a result of competition for financial support from donors.

<sup>112</sup> YouTube Channel: Максимально

<sup>113</sup> YouTube Channel: Полчаса кардио

<sup>114</sup> YouTube Channel: ЭТОТ ПРУС

Highlighting their specific impact on maintaining regional audiences, such as those close to the Ukrainian border, in their informational bubble, they seek recognition of their work in preserving these audiences, who often serve as informants and content providers. At the same time, while the independent Belarusian media express a belief that less and less support will be provided to smaller independent media, some also see it as a natural filtering of the independent media market. Another aspect of this is reflected in a growing concern among the independent Belarusian media about the extensive support for the independent Russian media, and corresponding limited possibilities for Belarusian outlets. They argue that international politics sees the interests of Ukrainian civil society and Russian EXIM prioritised over support for Belarusian EXIM.

Access to information inside the country of origin necessitates different types of assistance for Belarusian and Russian media in exile. As the independent Belarusian media are completely deprived of the possibility of travelling back to their country, where they would face criminal charges for working for an “extremist formation”, access to information within the country is almost impossible, and there is a reliance on journalists’ personal ties and internal sources. The independent Russian media still have some possibility of recruiting new correspondents and travelling back to Russia for material collection and personal matters. So, the independent Belarusian media require more support to find additional sources and build skills in investigative formats, including working with leaked and available (open source) data. For the independent Russian exiled media, this need is complemented by the need for security measures related to correspondents’ travel to Russia.



REUTERS / Tobias Schwarz

# Supporting independent media and journalists in exile: Approaches and challenges

The section below provides an overview of major CSOs that have distributed various types of support to the communities of the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media since their relocation. The section first provides an overview of support infrastructure. It secondly addresses the main types of support as a response to the needs of independent exiled media. Finally, the section explores how support approaches have changed and the challenges for CSOs supporting independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile.

The emigration wave of independent media from Belarus in 2021 and Russia after 2022 highlighted the need to assist independent media organisations with relocation, legalisation, adaptation, the acquisition of finances and many other aspects. Support to the independent Belarusian media sector is estimated to be worth 22.3 million euros per year,<sup>115</sup> compared to 32.7 million euros per year for the independent Russian exiled media.<sup>116</sup> The support infrastructure for journalists remains somewhat complicated in terms of publicity of existing support and the mixed profiles of the organisations providing help. At the same time, it is possible to distinguish several types of stakeholders who deliver help to the independent exiled media:




- **Human rights organisations** which cover the needs of independent exiled media whenever a threat to their human rights emerges. Major types of support include emergency support, such as relocation, and local and international advocacy. Human rights organisations tend to prioritise those requiring urgent assistance and do not assist the EXIM with direct project-based financial support for the operation of the media.
- **International media development organisations** which cover the needs of independent exiled media related to operational, financial, product and wellbeing matters. These organisations are rather flexible and constantly shift their types of support based on media organisations' needs.
- **Host countries, authorities and governmental bodies** which provide local assistance with registration, facilities for operation or small grants for the first months of work.
- **National and international associations of journalists** which provide networking services, conduct needs assessments, advocacy and educational and capacity-building activities. Overall, these organisations adjust approaches depending on the existing needs.

<sup>115</sup> Silenced but Resilient: Belarusian Exiled Media since the 2020 Revolution, JX Fund, March 2024





































































































<sup>116</sup> Sustaining Independence: Current State of Russian Media in Exile, JX Fund, November 2023

alt= Silhouetted figures of officials seated at a table, with journalists and camera operators positioned in the background, capturing the event. The reflection on the polished surface of the table adds depth to the composition, highlighting a formal press or conference setting.

## Awareness of Support Resources for Journalists in Relocation<sup>117</sup>

	Media advocacy	Individual level				Organisational level				
		Legalisation of individuals	Adaptation and well-being	Safety and security	Networking	Financial support	Rebuilding operations	Legal support to media teams	Product, tech, digital support	Capacity building
 Yes										
 Yes, partly										
 No support										

### Information about the following organisations was gathered during interviews or from materials provided by them

Media in Cooperation and Transition (MICT)										
Media Hub Riga										
Prague Civil Society Center										
Free Press Unlimited										
International Media Support (IMS)										
Journalists in Need Network										
JX Fund										
Interational Center for Journalists (ICFJ)										
Belarus in focus										
Körper-Stiftung										

### Information about the following organisations was gathered from open sources

Belarusian Human Rights House										
Civic Belarus										
Committee to Protect Journalists										
Freedom House										
Internews										
Human Rights Monitoring Institute										
European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF)										
Exile Media Hub Berlin										
International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)										
Journalism Solidarity Foundation										
Media Freedom Coalition (MFC)										
Nordic Council										
People in Need										
Reporters Without Borders										
Thomson Reuters Foundation										



In the current report, we have identified around 31 key organisations that provide one, some or several types of services to the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media operating from Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The Exhibit above illustrates our mapping.

While the types of support vary depending on the country and organisation, the influx of independent exiled media from Belarus and Russia has pushed the support infrastructure to adjust and change as a result of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. As one of the CSO respondents puts it:

*"In March – April 2022 we have mostly addressed relocating needs coming from everyone. Everyone was screaming, saying that they need visas, they need this, they need that. And at the same time, everyone was helping Ukraine. So, you know, it was a nightmare. I think that situation now has stabilised. But at the same time, I think that it was a valuable experience for many media profile organisations to reboot their strategies and their respective programmes. Because, obviously, this tragedy has revealed a lot of loopholes, mistakes, and weak points, where many were not able to deliver help when there was an immediate need."*

For other types of organisations, such as the Belarusian Association of Journalists, that also relocated their team amidst

the political crisis in Belarus, the adjustment and re-establishment of operations to effectively support the journalist community required them to recreate infrastructure and adapt to the demands and regulations of the new host country.

More than half of the interviewed CSOs point to the fact that their support is difficult to describe as they rely on needs assessments and on formal and informal contacts with independent exiled media, and they have to navigate rapidly changing political landscapes: *"We are there listening to what they need, seeing what we can do, what other organisations could provide, giving resource information, trying to connect people with each other, and so on."*

Based on needs assessments, the types of assistance often change, which, in some cases, is possible due to the high level of trust between donors and CSOs that receive budget for exiled media rapid response needs: *"Our main idea is to make sure that independent journalists can proceed with their work right away without any additional headaches, regarding visas, residence permits, accreditations, and other stuff."*

Some of the organisations formulate their overarching approach as ensuring that the *"media ecosystem can survive"* and are prepared to do *"whatever we believe is not done by others."*

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alt= Exhibit 11: This illustration identifies and categorises key organisations that offer various types of support to independent Belarusian and Russian independent exiled media in host countries like Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The Exhibit organises these organisations based on the specific services they provide, segmented into two main levels:

Individual Level Support - Including: Media Advocacy, Legalisation for Individuals, Adaptation and Well-being, Safety and Security, Networking

Organisational Level Support - Encompassing: Financial Support, Rebuilding Operations, Legal Support for Media Teams, Product, Technology, and Digital Support, Capacity Building

Each organisation is mapped according to the support they provide, with categories such as "Yes," "Yes, Partly," and "No Support" to indicate the scope and extent of their assistance in each area. For example, organisations like Reporters Without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists are noted for their advocacy and support in safety and security, while Freedom House and International Media Support (IMS) are recognised for financial and operational rebuilding assistance.

<sup>117</sup> The mapping data is collected based on three sources: 1. Interviews with the representatives of the 14 CSOs (see appendix for list of the interviewed CSOs). 2. Interviews with the representatives of the Belarusian and Russian exiled media, who reported on received assistance from the CSOs. 3. Webpages of CSOs that have not taken part in the interviews. The support infrastructure also includes other CSOs that one or several types of assistance to the Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile. However, for number of reasons, such as security, this information is not public. Additionally, some of the CSOs interviewed for this study have not agreed to be displayed on the mapping

Others point out that in their activity, they are also driven by the strategic priorities of the donors, responding to the specific programmes. As already indicated above, most of the CSOs had to partly adjust their work. Others sought cooperation with national authorities, with one Germany-based CSOs noting that: *“Now we've got not only that the foreign ministry, the housing ministry and foreign secretary have money to offer for organisations, but also our cultural department has money for organisations who have journalists' initiatives.”*

At the same time, many respondents noted that the future of these ties, as well as the conditions for exiled journalists in the host countries, appears very uncertain. Some of the Germany-based CSOs that receive public money expressed worry that this support may dry up due to political changes within the country: *“Political developments in Germany, but also Europe, are terrifying.”* Czechia-based CSOs share similar concerns:

*“Political changes in various countries' elections may affect our operation in a way that maybe priorities will change, and the donor money will decrease, which means that as a grant department, we will have limited opportunities to support particular media.”*

*“If Trump gets elected as the US president, the priorities of US government are going to change, and we have to expect a decrease of support towards the media in exile.”*

Other respondents highlight that while in 2020–2021, their main focus was on providing high-quality relocation and first-hand adaptation services, today, there is a growing demand to assist the independent exiled media with settling down, sustaining their teams and

operations, and rebuilding their financial sustainability in a host country. One CSO explains:

*“Since 2022, when all the independent media were kicked out of the country, trying to teach Russian journalists more skills is not really a good way to conduct work because they're facing much bigger problems right now. It's financial sustainability. It's trying to reach their audience. It's trying to stay open. And so, I think there is definitely more emphasis on that rather than capacity building.”*

Some of the CSOs have broken down their approach and work according to various stages, dividing them into *“relocation – 6 months to a year; reorientation – one to three years, and consolidation in a new country – the most difficult phase where the money for support dries out.”*

In the initial stages of relocation and reorientation, CSOs often have to manually lobby and advocate at the official institutions and agencies within the host countries.

In recent years, some CSOs have established and now facilitate the Media Hubs for Belarusian and Russian journalists. In particular, the Berlin Incubator for Media in Exile and the Media Hub Riga represent quite concrete cases of CSOs providing a multifaceted infrastructure for journalists that covers the needs of networking, wellbeing and operations, as well as providing legal assistance and capacity building.

As a lot of CSOs have experienced significant changes in their work during the last few years, most of them have strengthened their capacity, and other organisations have emerged from scratch.

Before the next section describes specific assistance in financial sustainability, adaptation and wellbeing, capacity building

and operations, and media advocacy, we summarise the shared opinions of the stakeholders that support independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile:

- **Flexibility and needs-based approach.** Most CSOs claim to ground their support programmes on the specific needs of the independent media at a given period of time. At the same time, some actors are limited by their mandate (human rights or media), by specific donor calls and by internal resources.
- **Uncertainty related to geopolitical developments.** As the expansion and re-purposing of assistance for many CSOs came with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the CSOs' test for resilience showed that the sector needs to be prepared for an uncertain geopolitical reality. With the growth of right-wing parties' influence in the host countries and, in some cases, increased hostility towards the citizens of Belarus and Russia, as well as larger geopolitical changes in the world, governmental donors' support becomes uncertain in terms of priorities, regions covered and volume of assistance provided.
- **Scepticism towards sustainable business models.** While some CSOs list multiple activities aimed at strengthening independent exiled media as organisations, with diversified sources of income and stable foundations that partially rely on self-funding, over half of CSO respondents echo the worries of the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media in their scepticism around the possibility of establishing functioning business models in exile.

During the interviews, CSOs raised three main challenges that they face while providing assistance to exiled media. Firstly, CSOs note weak coordination between the organisations that support the independent Belarusian and/or Russian media in exile. As some funding information is sensitive, it becomes difficult to avoid repeating the activities of other organisations and to fill the gaps in systematic support. One of the respondents points to a need for regular meetings and division of assistance forms, as well as for clear communication of opportunities to the recipients.

Both local and international organisations highlight coordination as a way to *“spend the funds better, so we are more efficient, so that we all do not do the same work, and expect different results.”* They flag that the lack of coordination between the various organisations providing support leads to duplication and a lack of institutional cooperation:

*“A lot of gaps are left unaddressed, and there is just a lot of inefficiency and waste happening in the space because there is no proper cooperation institutionally.”*

Others point out that coordination would lead to more effective advocacy:

*“If, for example, the bunch of organisations went together and did lobbying in EU among the friendly governments, they may change rules and procedures so that exiled Russian media can get residence permits more easily than what is the case right now.”*

Others note that coordination requires additional working time, stretching capacity that not every CSO has, and that it is seen as somewhat meaningless as most CSOs are driven by donors' priorities.

Also, because CSOs are often competing for donor funding, they can see coordination as a potential risk. However, CSOs that did attend strategic and coordination meetings valued the result in identifying gaps in support: *“We attended such discussions initiated by the donors for the organisations that are running hubs, and I think it would be even better if we had journalists themselves attending these meetings.”*

A second challenge mentioned by CSO respondents concerned funding, which limits their approaches and the amount of support they can offer exiled media.

*“Ideally, we would love to give them, say, €50,000 or €100,000 and say: “Here. You need this for your work, for your 1st year.*

*But we don't. I feel that both for us, but especially for the partners that need funds to operate, it is becoming almost only harder to generate income”*, IMS (International Media Support) representative.

As funding often depends on governmental approaches, some CSOs highlight political changes as a financial planning challenge: *“Most of the funding is unfortunately not coming from private sources, but rather from governments, which means it is always geopolitically driven. There are always some democratic values behind that, but in the end, it is all geopolitically driven.”* Some note that many donors do not support the activities that they see as most beneficial, such as community meetings or recreational activities.



REUTERS / Marco Bello

alt= An open newsroom environment with multiple monitors displaying live news feeds on a large wall. In the foreground, two individuals engage in discussion while seated at desks equipped with computer workstations. The setting reflects a dynamic and collaborative media workspace.

## Financial support

Following the relocation of many independent exiled media, financial sustainability remains the top priority. It is tightly intertwined with challenges and needs related to wellbeing, adaptation, and reaching out to the audience in the country of origin. From the interviews with CSOs, it is clear that the support organisations are well aware of this, and each aims to address it with various actions.

One of the forms of assistance is project-based funding. International CSOs that support independent media in exile and cooperate with international donors provide funding following specific calls and programmes. Different CSOs have different priorities and approaches. For example, the Prague Civil Society Centre always works through invitation-only calls. However, most Germany-based CSOs say that they proactively seek potential recipients who need support. As our CSO interviews confirm, financial support is mostly mixed (project-based and flexible) or needs-oriented. From the mapping above, we have identified 11 actors who provide project-based support occasionally or consistently, mostly distributed by international donors or national governments. Flexible or core funding, which allows exiled media to make spending decisions according to their own priorities, remains rather rare. However, some CSOs compensate for this with their speed of processing:

*“We do not offer very big amounts of core funding for two years. This is rather not our mandate, but what we can say is that we are fast, and we try to be as flexible as possible and demanddriven.”*

Some organisations aim to proactively work with independent exiled media in terms of the application process.

As one respondent explains: *“If something is not possible to implement within the project, we offer exiled media to include them into one of our support programs and cover those costs.”*

Indirect financial assistance is another type of support that CSOs provide. This includes payments for services that exiled independent media access in the host countries, from covering the bills for legal advisors to funding recreational opportunities such as swimming pool membership. This type of support is provided by almost all CSOs represented in the mapping.

Some CSOs have a permanent tax lawyer or legal advisor, while others outsource independent media teams' legal requests. In other cases, CSOs recruit relevant specialists when the demand among the independent exiled media arises.

Other forms of financial assistance include emergency support. Addressing the needs of those media still in the country of origin who need to organise urgent relocation for team members, CSOs have developed an emergency support package or a rapid response mechanism. Media Hub Riga representatives describe this support as temporary and limited:

*“We did have an emergency grant for the first year of the war that covered housing, food, clothes, everything that is kind of valid until they get their residency permit status and have the freedom to get another job and earn money.”*

Apart from legalisation, relocation services and assistance in obtaining a visa or finding accommodation, emergency support often includes pocket money for individual media employees and their families. Freedom House in Lithuania was mentioned by several media respondents

as an organisation that assisted with full emergency relocation. As the representative of this CSO clarifies, as a human rights organisation, they prioritise facilitating a quick relocation and establishment of the person in their host country.

This includes initial support letters for legalisation as well as assistance in paying the costs for primary expenditures related to relocation. Another CSO, the IMS, highlight their emergency funding as a successful example of rapid support:

*“Emergency funds that usually go to individuals is when somebody needs to get out quickly. They need to get flights or need to get a visa or something like that, emergency funding or somebody needs medical treatment.”*

The fourth form of financial support is assistance in increasing the financial sustainability of independent exiled media through connecting media teams to relevant donors and increasing their fundraising literacy. The shift towards financial sustainability supervision was identified by some of the CSOs during the second half of 2022 and partly 2023. The Berlin Incubator for Media in Exile explains that

financial sustainability is a track they have prioritised due to the decreasing visibility of the independent exiled media on the international landscape:

*“Media in exile that we work with are getting less visible for the donors, for the international public, international audience, and that's a big issue for them. So, yeah, I think financial sustainability is the number one point these days for them.”*

Various CSOs have focused on developing fundraising strategies for independent exiled media, as well as providing educational opportunities for media personnel concerning fundraising and project management. Others have proactively shared a map of the donor community that provides financial opportunities for the exiled independent media.

Finally, CSOs prioritise education and expert assistance in constructing sustainable business models. Even though many independent exiled media express scepticism towards building sustainable business models, media development CSOs have focused on this activity in recent years:



alt= A press conference setup featuring a row of colourful microphones from various media outlets in the foreground, with journalists, photographers, and camera operators positioned in the background. The scene reflects an active and engaging media event.

*“Financial sustainability became the main issue ... from revenue diversification to strategic business and media business.”*

Russian exiled media have positively highlighted support in this area provided by the JX Fund. At the same time, independent Belarusian exiled media remain

quite concerned about the possibility of building sustainable business models. Several CSOs echo this opinion, highlighting that *“I wish we had more capacity to support media outlets financially rather than demanding that they become financially sustainable because I don't think it's realistic in the current world.”*

## Legal assistance

Legalisation is the second critical issue expressed by the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media. On one hand, interviews demonstrate that most exiled journalists have been able to come through the initial stages of legalisation. On the other hand, multiple needs remain unaddressed, or addressed only on an ad-hoc basis. While most CSOs have ways of providing legal consultants, lawyers and other relevant experts, as well as finance services related to the legalisation of individuals and media organisations, only a few have any influence on a growing political pressure within the host countries that appears particularly problematic for the holders of Belarusian and Russian passports.

One form of legalisation assistance is the provision of relevant expertise, such as lawyers, legal consultants and advisors. Connected to indirect financial support, legal assistance relates to covering costs for the services of legal advisors and relevant experts. Additionally, CSOs that are in close contact with the local authorities and migration agencies in the host countries, as well as host countries' embassies in Belarus or Russia, provide support letters and vouch for the applicants when they seek residence permits in the host countries.

Media Hub Riga notes that, on their request, the secret services conduct

a mandatory verification of a particular person and their family members during the immigration process. As in Latvia, the regular process of issuing residence permits to Russian citizens has been halted due to the Russia's war in Ukraine, the only option remaining is by a political decision to issue resident permits in the “interests of the Latvian state”:

*“The NGO partner verifies and prepares the list of exiled media workers in need of residency permits, along with detailed cases' descriptions of each media worker and their family members, submits it to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the confirmation of National Interest. Once confirmed, the case is processed through Immigration office and finalised by the Minister of Interior. And then two ministers have to sign off. However, by law, it's not allowed to grant residency permits to Russians. But in the interest of the state, the political decision can be made.”*

In Lithuania, legalisation follows a similar verification procedure, including the one performed by the CSOs through existing networks and ties.

In Lithuania, Belarus and Russia are seen as a threat to the country's national security (as reflected in some political decisions, such as the 2023 recognition of 910 Belarusians and 254 Russian citizens in Lithuania as threats to the national

security.<sup>118</sup>), and therefore it remains challenging for Belarusian and Russian passport holders.

In Germany, CSOs highlight that the workload related to the legalisation of journalists is enormous, and the procedures extremely difficult. Organisations like JX Fund point out that legal assistance on their side also includes informational support (advising how to choose a country for legalisation and entity registration):

*“Together with partners, we offered incubators where, among other topics, we explained how to register an outlet, what the tax system is, how to be a freelancer in a new country, what this implies, and how this can be structured.”*

Fewer difficulties are highlighted in relation to legalisation in Poland. As the Belarusian exiled media indicate, Poland was strategically chosen as it provides the easiest conditions for relocation and “the country’s policies towards Belarusians seem to be stable.” Representatives of a regional media organisation located in Bialystok (Poland) highlighted that in Poland, they have received assistance both from the local authorities and from the local diaspora:

*“At the beginning, we had help from the Belarusian Human Rights House in Vilnius and MediaSol. Then, the local Polish organisation and Belarusians in the diaspora helped us register as Polish, and we received some coins for the first months. Legally, we adapted quickly.”*

Overall, about half of the CSOs we identified assist with the legalisation needs of the independent Belarusian and the Russian exiled media on the individual and/or organisational level. Most organisations provide assistance related to the initial legalisation and registration

of their media entity and the opening of bank accounts. Others also provide on-demand support in the later stages related to tax matters and the extension of residence permits. Comparing the situations across the countries, we notice that while in Poland and Germany, most journalists seek asylum, independent exiled media based in Czechia, Latvia, and Lithuania mostly apply for residency permits following humanitarian visas.



REUTERS / Joe Skipper

alt= A media control room with a person seated at a desk, monitoring multiple screens displaying various video feeds. The setup includes professional-grade equipment, indicating a high-tech environment for broadcast or content management operations.



## Adaptation and wellbeing

Burnouts, trauma recovery, and adaptation to new conditions are just a few aspects of mental health-related issues highlighted by the independent exiled media. CSOs are well aware of these factors and mobilise their resources to effectively address adaptation and wellbeing at all stages of relocation:

*“The psychosocial element of being in exile, relocating, and re-establishing yourself impacts media outlets. Partner organisations aim to provide safety and do what they can so that exiled media can continue to produce journalism.”*

About 40% of the identified CSOs provide some type of service related to adaptation and wellbeing. Mental health-related assistance can be described as threefold.

Firstly, CSOs provide requested expert assistance (therapists, counselling and similar) for exiled media teams. Additionally, some CSOs have facilitated retreats, covered medical insurance or funded relevant experts for their diagnostic work assessing teams’ mental health. Many CSOs have provided regular training related to mental health, overcoming trauma, and adaptation to new conditions. Independent exiled media have appreciated support in the form of retreats:

*“We had a very cool grant in 2023 from one organisation that supported our retreat project and strategic session. We went to the mountains. And we spent a week in the mountains, and it had a colossal effect on the whole team. Firstly, we all met together for the first time ever with the current line-up. Secondly, we took a break from our computers. And the husbands and wives moved away from their everyday lives, and we just relaxed. This had a very strong effect on the next few months; it was clear that people*

*seemed to be getting to know each other. It became easier for them to work together”,* notes one of the Belarusian exiled media representatives.

So far, we can see that Russian respondents, especially in Germany, note that they receive access to various forms of psychological support, such as therapy sessions or retreats. In the Belarusian case, Belarus in Focus has organised therapy consultation, which, in their assessment, turned out to be a one-off response that is not effective. The organisation lacks the resources to establish a long and multi-faceted program of mental support in the form of therapy sessions and retreats.

In some cases, CSOs had to seek professionals and resources to secure the needs of people who were seriously ill: *“We have had cases of cancer or one person almost went blind. We had to fund urgent surgery.”* Independent Belarusian exiled media name examples such as the assistance from the human rights organisation Spring (Viasna) in the form of a medical programme including MRIs and dental care, which was appreciated by journalists who fled from Belarus after imprisonment.

Belarus in Focus has organised therapy consultation, which, in their assessment, turned out to be a one-off response that is not effective. The organisation lacks the resources to establish a long and multi-faceted program of mental support in the form of therapy sessions and retreats.

One idea voiced by CSOs regards the creation of a centralised psychological support line. Some media respondents echo this idea:

*“It’s very sad that there is still no hotline with psychological help for journalists because I know many guys who some*

*times just fall into depression, some even have suicidal thoughts, which is a very terrible situation.”*

However, other media explained that this idea is less relevant since *“we have a permanent contractor who is ready to provide emergency support, if necessary. And also, we are ready to provide our employees with specialists of their choice.”*

Secondly, some CSOs experimented with wellbeing practices and recreational activities. Media Hub Riga took a creative approach in testing various options, ranging from the male soccer team for journalists to community events that include families, and yoga classes. Thirdly, CSOs provide adaptation help in the form of payment for language courses in the country of residence, networking activities and meetings with locals. One Germany-based CSO points out that they investigate whether the local authorities provide language courses and cover that need if the state does not provide it. Finally, a handful of CSOs have also provided assistance for family members beyond rapid response relocation.

CSOs have also focused on ensuring the security of independent exiled media, in the form of a safe office, and some have provided access to shelters. The Journalists in Need Network has also mentioned the practice of conflict management assistance within teams, as stressful circumstances related to mental vulnerabilities sometimes lead to internal disputes.

Networking, which is one element of CSOs’ wellbeing support, includes meetings with journalists from different countries. CSOs would like to see more of these events:

*“I think it’s important to make mixed events maybe for media in exile, not only for Russia or Belarus but also say from Nicaragua, to help them to meet each other and exchange experiences.”*

Finally, as some CSOs see physical security as part of wellbeing, they cover this need by organising training and education on physical security for media workers in short-term or long-term formats. As some journalists risk being placed in refugee camps upon their arrival, CSOs also try to address this need by looking for alternative places of residence whenever possible. One CSO respondent pointed out that:

*“We may soon need to accept that some people will not survive this struggle and will leave media.”*

A similar opinion was expressed by another respondent, who highlighted that, in their opinion, most exiled Russian journalists in Germany will leave the media sector within a few years. Another CSO respondent highlighted that psychological matters are closely connected to legalisation and finance issues and that *“psychological support would be somewhat meaningless if you are not covering the basis.”*

## Capacity building and operations

Independent exiled media have highlighted multiple challenges related to their operational needs and lack of human resources. As our interviews show, CSOs have provided various kinds of help in ensuring that the conditions for independent exiled media operations are adequate. Additionally, multiple forms of technical and financial assistance have been used to help reach audiences and overcome the algorithmic policies of the Big Tech companies. Two thirds of the CSOs that we identified assist independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media in capacity building and operations, including product and technical support.

The first type of such assistance regards re-establishing operations in a new host country. Part of the organisational support for independent exiled media involves providing working infrastructure and technical assistance. JX Fund and Media Hub Riga have specifically focused on providing co-production spaces for work. Media Hub Riga was able to establish a space of over 500 square metres to accommodate the demands of the independent exiled media. It includes office space and recording

studios for videos and podcasts. It is seen as beneficial for journalists within the exiled community, and they also get a chance to meet colleagues, including those in the Western media. A common space for media from the same country allows them to broaden their network of sources and improve fact-checking routines: *“Larger media, Russia-focused or Moscow-focused, had a challenge verifying the information from the regions which is important at times of war, and having freelancers and smaller media from the regions with their sources was important, they helped to verify some news.”*

Some of the CSOs actively assist with content production training and strategies. For instance, the BIMEX (Berlin Incubator for Media in Exile) provided educational events and webinars on working with and promoting podcasts and video content on YouTube. ICFJ describes practices of providing educational support in *“fact-checking, source verification and protection, investigative skills, open-source intelligence, using satellite imagery and social media”* as well as *“use of financial forensics, AI in journalism.”*



REUTERS / Gene Blevins

alt= Silhouettes of individuals and camera equipment under a starry night sky, with faint outlines of the Milky Way visible in the background. The scene suggests an astrophotography session or stargazing activity in a tranquil outdoor setting.

Some CSOs provide project-based assistance related to improving the quality of content and developing another strand of journalism, for example, investigative journalism, election coverage, and conflict-sensitive journalism. In the case of Russian media in exile, many CSOs mention the need to develop their tone of voice and content production approaches to reach audiences influenced by state propaganda:

*“I think, to reach new audiences, they can try to use different language. I mean, it is still Russian language, but to pack it differently, to use some different ways of content production, but also to address the audiences differently.”*

Some respondents point out that there is more need to focus on the supporting journalists that are still in the country of origin: *“These folks [exiled media] are relatively safe and good. Obviously, they need the support, but the main thing is their reporters on the ground.”*

To foster the education of future media workers, starting from 2021, the Centre for Media Studies at Stockholm School of Economics is running a Future Media Management educational programme for Belarusian and Russian journalists and media-managers in exile.

Strategic assistance related to the re-establishment of media operations in a host country has been named by CSOs as one of the current priorities. In order to deliver strategic support, CSOs maintain regular contact with the independent exiled media, and monitor developments.

*“We gather exiled media in Europe, and we talk to them more about the business side of journalism. So, revenue diversification, strategic thinking, financial sustainability, and media business. So, all*

*the logistics and business side of journalism rather than journalism itself because these journalists are pretty skilled, and they don't need to be taught.”*

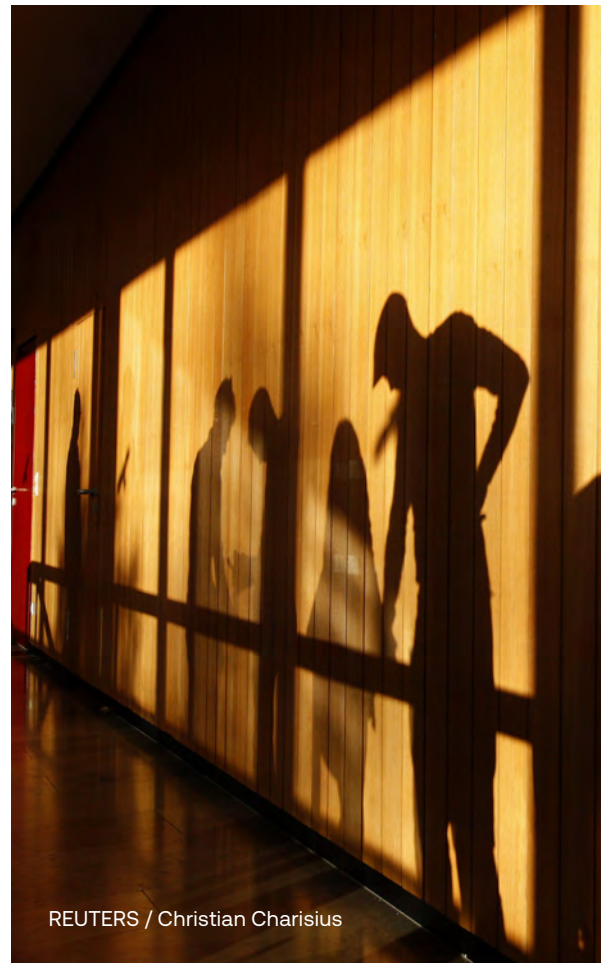
CSOs suggest that strategic assistance involves capacity-building support and a strategic outlook into the future from a financial perspective, as well as in terms of content, human resources and political landscapes. As IMS (International Media Support) representatives clarify, this often involves *“our external expert leading the discussions and providing input and bringing up issues and challenging them and so on.”*

Capacity building is often multifaceted and, as an MICT representative explains, *“can be a two–three hour session with an accountant on a specific issue, or two–three hours with advertising specialist for Poland, 3–4 days workshops on a specific need, it is always tailor-made and demand-driven.”* CSOs note that such events and specific training sessions often reveal new needs and challenges for exiled media that can later be followed-up and addressed.

Providing opportunities for exiled media to build ties with the local and national media of the host countries is another form of operational support facilitated by CSOs. The JX Fund mentioned an example of a networking event, Exiled Media Forum, where the independent Belarusian and the Russian exiled media met with the German media to exchange experience and build networking. The Prague Civil Society Centre provides an investigative accelerator training course for journalists keen to develop their skills in this area, with sessions led by experienced journalists from Eastern and Central Europe. Some organisations provide fellowships for independent exiled media, programmes that offer an opportunity to work

hand in hand with media professionals in another country. CSOs have provided the possibility of exchange programmes, such as visits to the US, where exiled media professionals have spent three weeks meeting local journalists and experts to share best practice.

Finally, some CSOs provide flexible financial support for operational costs. The Prague Civil Society Centre, through tight cooperation with independent exiled media, identifies potential candidates that need assistance and offers financial support that the organisation's respondents describe as *“just flexible money that can cover their operational costs to make sure that they can smoothly run their operation.”*



## Media advocacy

Closely linked with the previous support types provided by CSOs, media advocacy focuses on encouraging assistance to independent exiled media at a national level, among partner organisations and within the donor community. Responsibility for supporting and promoting financial sustainability, legal security, psychological wellbeing and resilient media organisations often lies in the hands of CSOs. The majority of identified CSOs work with media advocacy in one way or another (see Exhibit 11, p. 38).

Media advocacy requires the regular monitoring of political landscapes in the host countries. This has included, in particular, closely monitoring changing attitudes and policies towards Belarusian and Russian citizens. As the first section of this report shows, over the last two years, at least three out of the five host countries have introduced serious legal restrictions for citizens of Belarus and Russia. These developments have demanded a proactive strategy from CSOs. On one hand, they had to advocate

for introducing exceptions regarding active dissenters (in the case of human rights organisations) or journalists (in the case of media development organisations). On the other hand, public advocacy on legalisation would be seen as disregarding the national security interests of the host country, which is why this advocacy was often conducted privately in the offices of governmental bodies and decision makers.

Advocacy work related to legalisation has quickly brought results for most CSOs that operate from the host countries.

As mentioned in the legal assistance section, Media Hub Riga and Freedom House have trusted relations with the local immigration authorities, and their recommendation letters that vouch for particular people are recognised as a justifiable reason to treat an applicant as an exception from the national security policies. In the case of Germany and Poland, the scope of political advocacy related to legalisation is smaller, as these countries have introduced milder restrictions for citizens of Belarus and Russia. In turn, some solutions, such as humanitarian visas in Poland, appeared as a response to the influx of Belarusians following the 2020 protests. At the same

time, providing recommendation letters for independent media employees is a routine practice in all host countries. It is directly or indirectly provided by the majority of CSOs.

Political advocacy often goes beyond legalisation issues. Germany-based CSOs highlight the practices of strategic meetings with a broad network of organisations and governmental bodies, including the MFA, to discuss the current state of assistance to independent exiled media and their operation. Belarus in Focus provides input for EU politicians:

*“We work within the framework of a consultative advisory group within the European Union.”*

Public advocacy is another form of lobbying for the needs of independent exiled media: *“We try to raise awareness in society and get involved.”* For example, the Prague Civil Society Centre mentions campaigns and events aimed at raising additional money for exiled media and civil society. Finally, some organisations that lack the financial capacity to provide funding to exiled media themselves seek to connect them to relevant donors and stakeholders.

## Assessment of support to the independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile

In the survey, we received feedback from exiled independent media on the support provided by CSOs. First, they were asked whether they knew where to get information about support for journalists and independent media in exile. More Russian respondents knew where to find information on media aid, and were aware

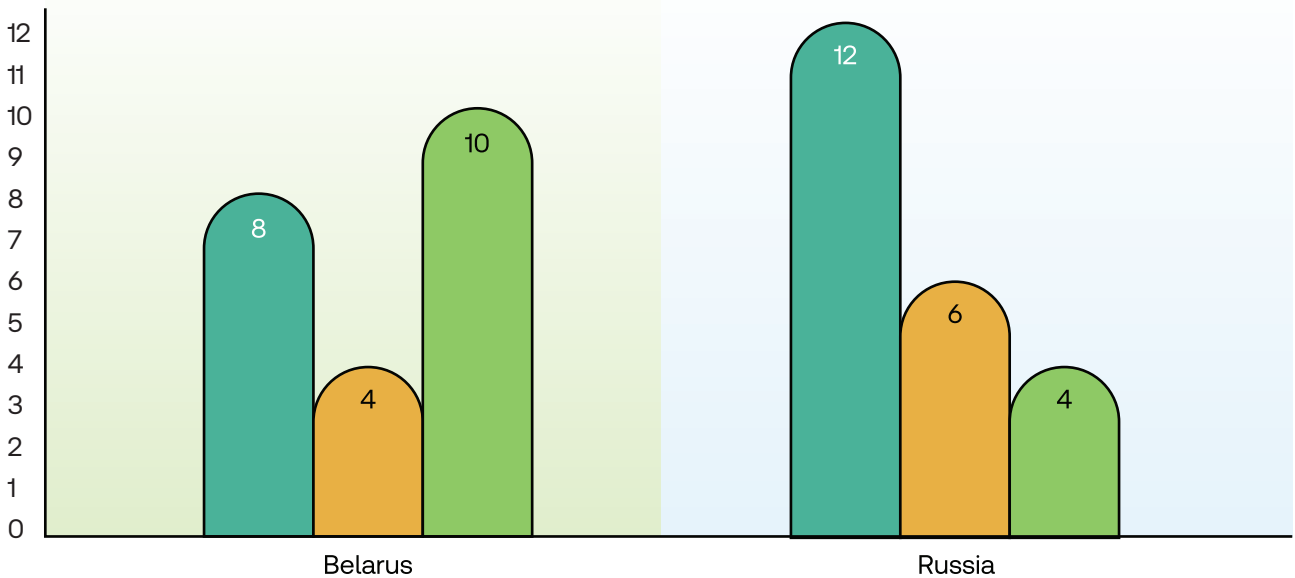
of specific organisations that deliver help to independent exiled media from Russia. Although awareness was generally slightly higher among Russian media, a high proportion of Belarusian respondents also knew where to find such information, or knew who to ask for guidance.

Exhibit 12

### Awareness of support to exiled journalists

Do you know where to look for information about support for journalists in relocation?

Yes No Don't know personally, but know whom to ask



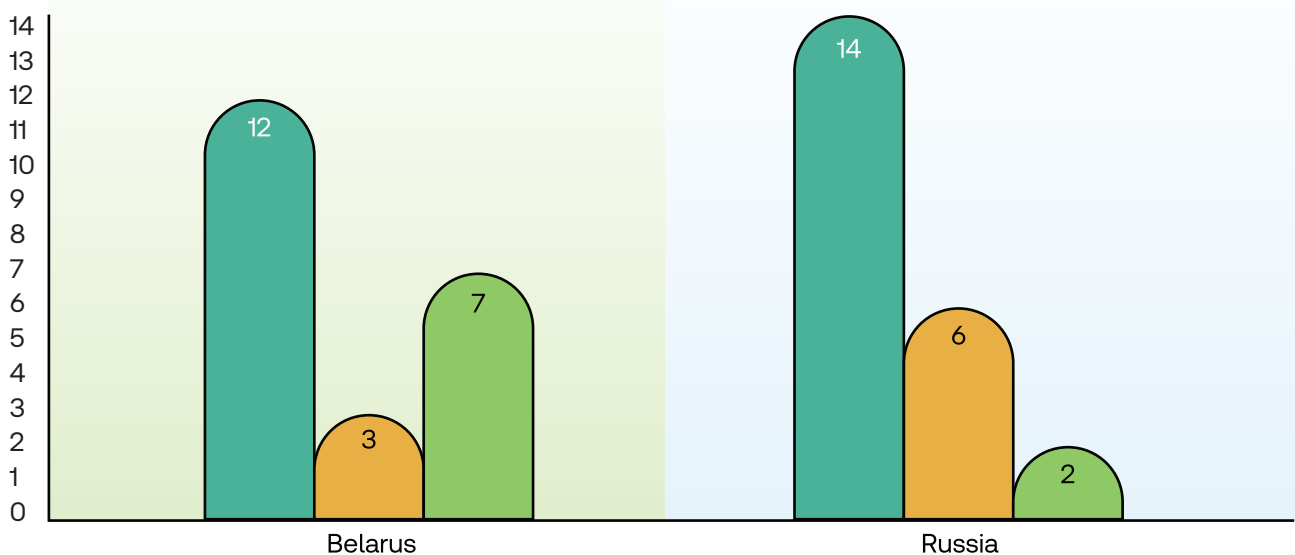
Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: Do you know where to look for information about support for journalists in relocation? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Exhibit 13

### Awareness of specific organisations that provide assistance to exiled media

Have you heard of specific organisations that provide relocation assistance to journalists?

Yes No Don't know personally, but know whom to ask



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: Have you heard of specific organisations that provide assistance to journalists in exile? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

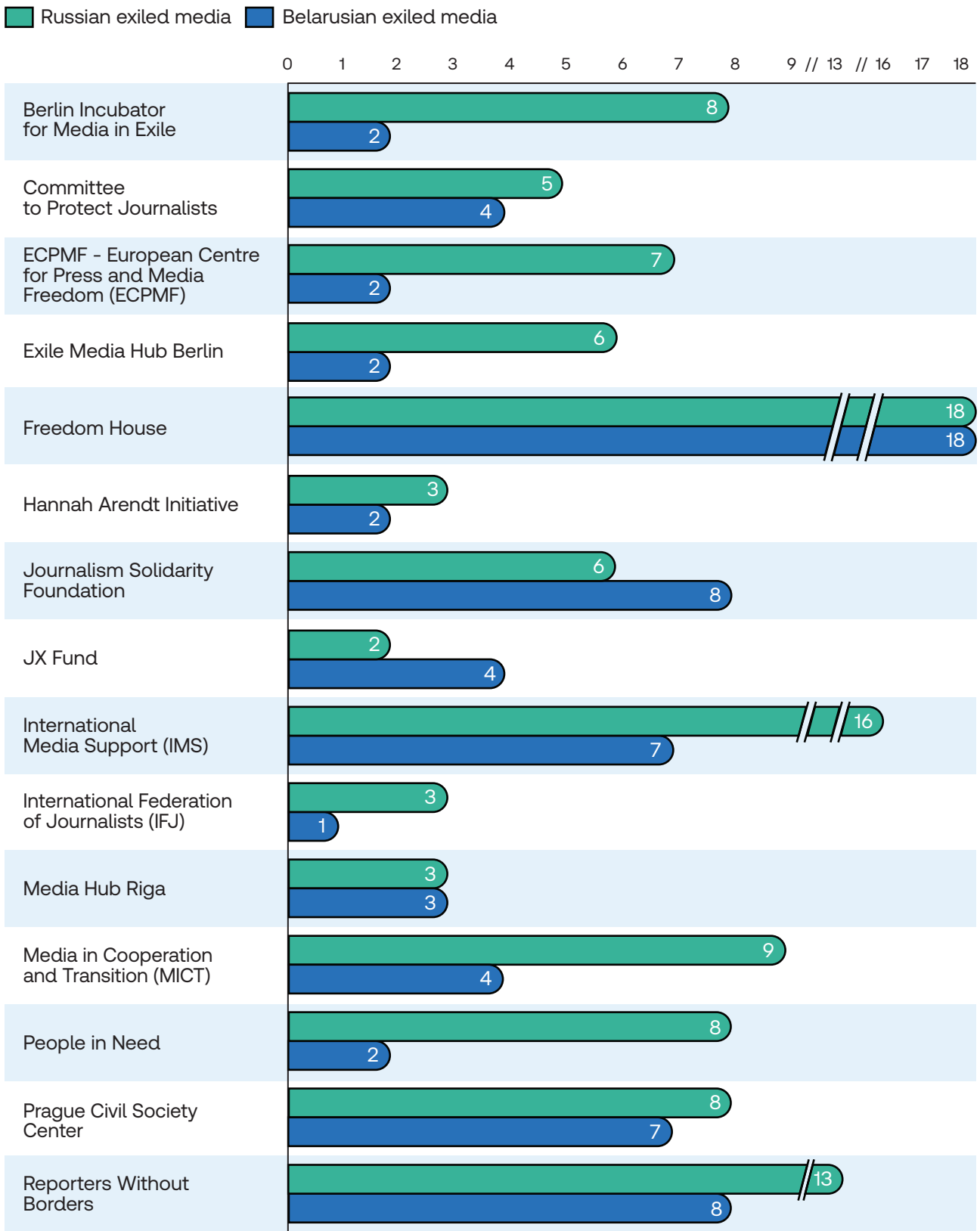
alt= Exhibit 12: Awareness of Support Resources for Journalists in Relocation

This chart assesses the level of awareness among Belarusian and Russian media representatives about available support resources for journalists in relocation. Responses are divided into "Yes," "No," and "Don't know but have someone to ask," with most respondents aware of resources, though some indicated limited knowledge.

alt= Exhibit 13: Awareness of Specific Organisations Supporting Exiled Journalists

This chart measures awareness among respondents of specific organisations providing assistance to exiled journalists, including options like Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, and others. Belarusian media representatives showed a slightly higher awareness of these organisations compared to Russian counterparts.

**Knowledge of each particular organisation that provides help to exiled media**



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: Which of the following organisations are you familiar with? (mark all organisations you know)? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

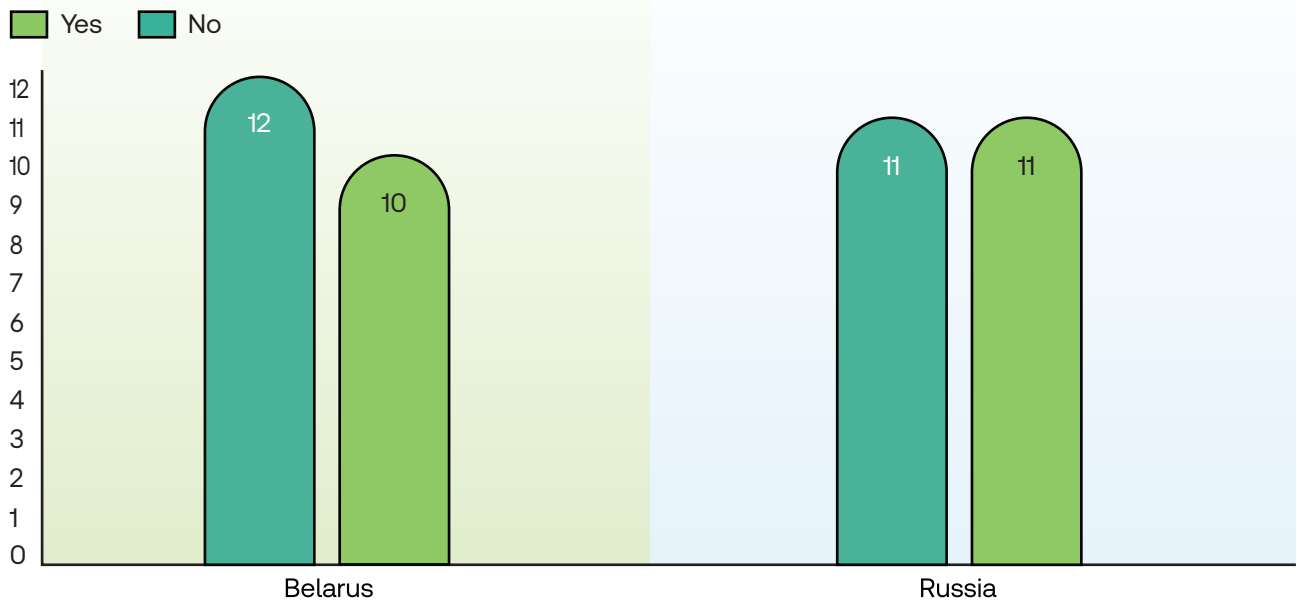
alt= Exhibit 14: Awareness of Support Organisations. This chart presents familiarity with various support organisations for exiled media. Organisations like Freedom House, IMS, Reporters without Borders had higher recognition rates.



Exhibit 15

### Knowledge of particular organisations that provide help to exiled media

Do you know what requests you can make to organisations that support exiled media from Belarus / Russia?



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Questions: Do you know what requests you can make to organisations that support exiled media from Belarus / Russia? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Two-thirds (16) of Russian respondents and a third of their Belarusian counterparts indicated that they know someone from their media teams who has turned to CSOs for help. Half of respondents from both groups have not themselves drawn on the support of CSOs. However, 10 respondents from Russian media and nine

from Belarusian media have turned to such assistance personally.

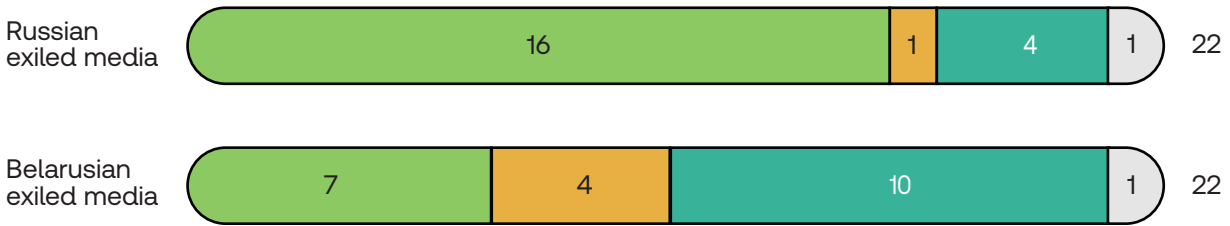
Looking at the positions held in the media organisations, we see that it is mostly administrative / managerial staff and main editors who apply for personal help.

alt= Exhibit 15: Knowledge of Assistance Types Offered by Support Organisations  
 This bar chart examines how familiar Belarusian and Russian independent media representatives are with the types of assistance they can request from support organisations, with options like financial aid, technical support, and legal assistance. While most respondents are aware of available assistance types, a portion remains unsure, indicating an information gap in understanding the full range of support offered.

Exhibit 16

**Has anyone from your media team turned to such organisations for support?**

■ Yes  
 ■ No  
 ■ Don't know  
 ■ Don't want to share

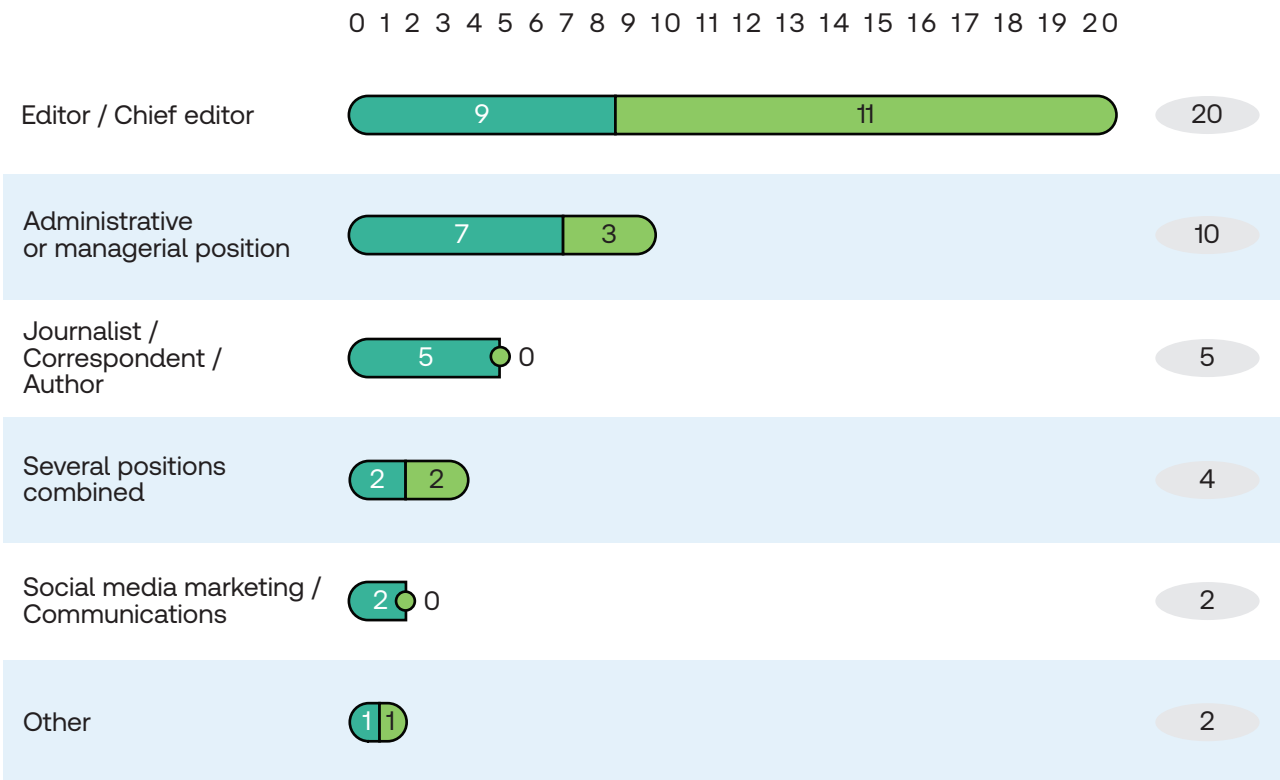


Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: Has anyone from your media team turned to such organisations for support? No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Exhibit 17

**Have you turned to these organisations for support?**

■ Yes  
 ■ No



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: Have you personally contacted such organisations for support? Answers measured against "role in media organisation." No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

alt= Exhibit 16: Media Teams' Use of Support Organisations

This chart indicates whether media teams from Belarus and Russia have sought help from support organisations, with responses split into "Yes," "No," and "Don't want to disclose."

alt= Exhibit 17: Personal Contact with Support Organisations by Media Role

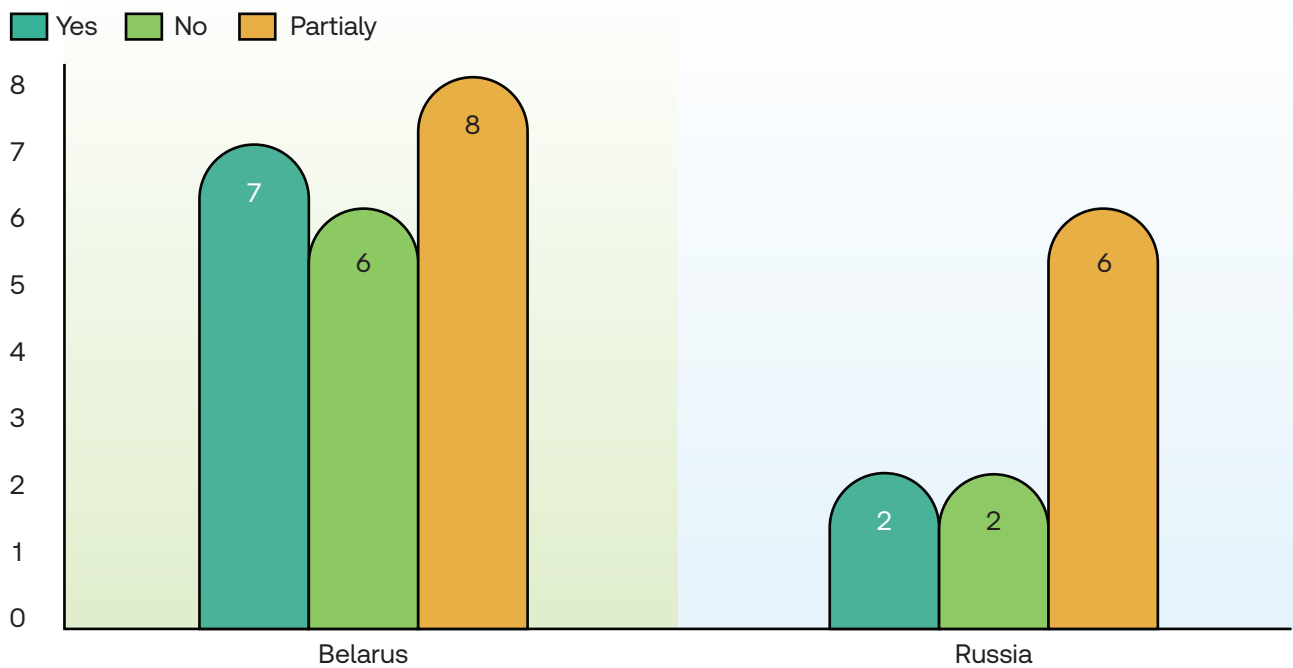
This chart shows engagement with support organisations by respondents' roles within their organisations (e.g., Journalists, Editors, and Administrative staff). Editors and Administrative staff reported the highest rates of personal contact.

Both the Belarusian and Russian independent media in exile assessed the support they had received as 6.8 to 6.9 on a 10-point scale. Survey respondents indicate that they applied for various types of assistance, including financial

support, mental health support, technical assistance and legalisation. 45% partially received the support they requested, 29% fully received the requested support, and 26% did not receive the requested assistance.

Exhibit 18

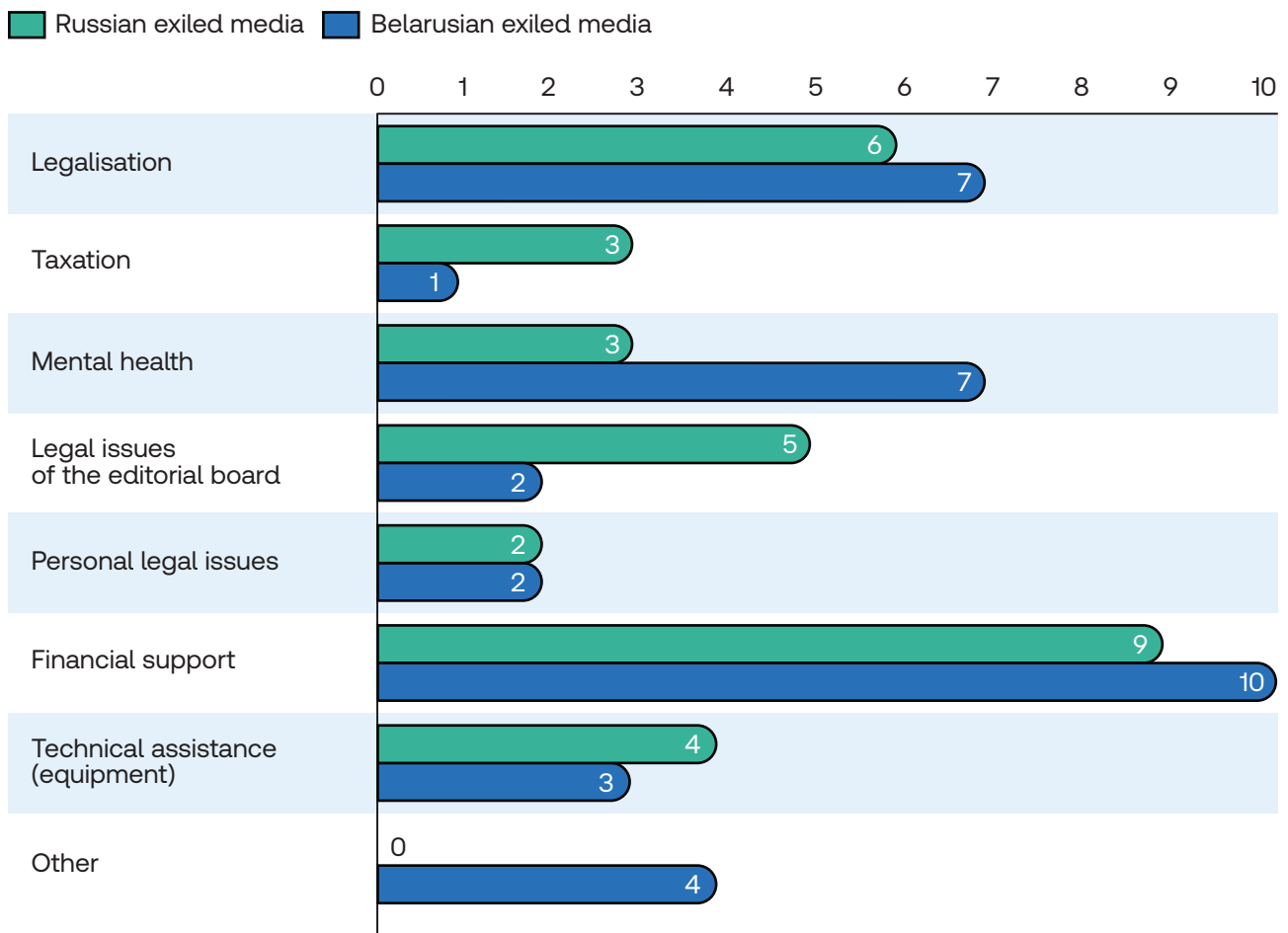
### Received assistance



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: Have you personally contacted such organisations for support? Answers measured against “role in media organisation.” No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Exhibit 19

### Type of requested assistance



Survey held on 20 May – 11 June 2024. Question: What questions have you addressed to organisations that support exiled media? (multiple choices) No of respondents: 44 (22 Belarusian and 22 Russian media representatives).

Among the independent media who relocated after the start of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the number of those who have received the requested support only partially is 77%. Some of the independent exiled media turned to help from various CSOs and had contrasting impressions:

*“It was really transparent in Czechia when we turned to one organisation. Everything was in time, crystal clear. We knew how much time it takes and what is required to prepare on your side. In turn, in Lithuania, nothing was clear. We didn’t know how to*

*communicate. There is this special person, who seems to be working alone and maybe therefore he is quite emotional and can’t manage everything. So, for us, this experience was pretty unclear. In Germany, a lot of trouble with emergency support is related to the political problems. There are just things that work super slow, such as bureaucracy, and partners can’t influence that,”* – respondent from a Russian exile media.

One of the editors from the independent Belarusian media admires the help they have received through the years and says:

*“I think they are doing everything that is possible. And we clearly understand that. We also understand that there is not just money on the shelf that is designated for the Belarusian media in exile, and all money transfers need to be justified. From our side, we need to do better and show that we are here, show which work we are doing.”*

To sum up, as we have seen in the section above, independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile require multifaceted assistance on an organisational and individual level, adapted to their stages of relocation.

Most CSOs have some degree of flexibility in their approaches to supporting exiled media. Some CSOs explain flexibility as a variation of support areas based on the current state and needs of the media they are working with. This flexibility and quick adaptation to evolving needs are made possible through a close collaboration with other organisations that share their observations regarding the independent exiled media sector. Based on trust between implementors and donors, rapid support regarding relocation or legalisation is available for those in urgent need. Part of the operational assistance granted to the independent exiled media derives from the flexibility in funding. Several organisations have mentioned that they proactively seek new partners who need support. In some cases, CSOs initiate the contact to propose meetings and potential cooperation.

For example, the Journalists in Need Network mentioned that they have a small grant program in which they target *“new media and new voices, which are not heard yet.”*

Additionally, as a response to wellbeing and adaptation needs, media hubs represent a successful practice. The provision

of workplaces, content production facilities, and community events has become possible due to both donor support and the development of self-sustaining elements. For example, Media Hub Riga mentions that part of their facilities are rented out to external clients, which provides a possibility to maintain the community centre financially, so that it is free for the use of the exiled media workers and their families.

Reflecting on the differences in support towards the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media, CSOs noted several trends. Firstly, the independent Belarusian media operate with much smaller budgets, which some see as a logical difference due to the size of the audience and others view as a failure of the donor community to prioritise funding. This is specifically important given public support of Belarusians and Russians for their political leadership, or as one respondent puts it.

*“Belarusians are not pro-Lukashenko. Or at least a lot less than Russians are pro-Putin. But, a lot of all the people that are more the liberal ones, they left, and their country is not their country anymore.”*

Secondly, respondents note that the independent Russian exiled media engage in various forms of journalism, including investigative journalism, which has not yet been developed in the Belarusian case.

Thirdly, the size of the media market and audiences varies significantly. Given this reality, some respondents believe that in a situation where it becomes impossible to support even half of the Russian exiled media, *“it would be more efficient to support most of the media in a Belarusian media sector so that they can effectively work for the Belarusians who are much less prone to Russian propaganda.”*

Analysing the needs framework and the approaches of CSOs in providing support to exiled media, it is clear that several gaps remain unaddressed.

Firstly, ensuring effective support to the independent Belarusian and the Russian exiled media requires a revision of funding approaches. There is a particular gap around the provision of operational, flexible and long-term funding that ensures the media's ability to plan for the future and test new formats of content production, audience engagement and business ideas.

Secondly, education and training provided for project managers, fundraisers and new journalists, articulated as a desired format of support, seems to lag behind as a priority. Small and medium-sized media organisations face shortages in these operational roles. This lack of experienced personnel to stabilise operations in a new donor-dependent reality can be compensated by providing additional training

for existing teams, along with a realisation of the demographic potential of Belarusians and Russians in exile for generating new skilled staff.

Thirdly, several independent media representatives voiced the idea of creating a centralised hotline to support journalists and media workers. The hotline could be co-managed by several CSOs and serve the needs of journalists facing traumatic situations or threats to their mental wellbeing.

Finally, it remains unclear who is leading and progressing advocacy at the level of Big Tech, highlighted by both journalists and CSOs as a major stakeholder influencing audience outreach.

At the same time, advocacy in this direction requires more serious efforts by large international CSOs and by journalists themselves.

# Main trends and expected developments

In this section, we briefly highlight the main trends focusing on comparing the conditions of work for the Belarusian and Russian exiled media in the host countries, their needs, and expected developments.

**1.** The rapidly shifting political landscapes in host countries, such as Latvia and Lithuania, are generating significant uncertainty for strategic planning among the exiled media and the CSOs supporting them. With national security now a primary focus for these nations' politics, there is an increasing sense of insecurity among the independent Belarusian and Russian exiled media, particularly regarding legal status and personal adaptation. Respondents have also noted that political transformations and increasing daily hostility will likely trigger another wave of media emigration from Lithuania. This unpredictability is further compounded by Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. elections and developments on the front-line in Ukraine.

As budgets for civil society and human rights foreign aid shrink, both independent exiled media and their supporters face an uncertain future. As highlighted by respondents, fear of favouritism is leading to increased competitiveness across the exiled independent media sector. Some respondents view limited funding for the sector as a result of decreased cooperation between independent exiled media, and increased competition for resources. Growing competitiveness also impacts the sense of community that respondents seek in exile, despite the fact that respondents highlight the importance of sharing experiences, practices and challenges with other exiled media.

The shortage of funding and rising competitiveness calls for flexibility, revised strategies, and new alliances between CSOs, national governments, international donors and private funders. Supporting independent exiled media under these conditions may require the institutionalisation of aid programmes at the political level, which will entail robust advocacy efforts by CSOs. Additionally, to navigate global uncertainties, CSOs and the donor community might consider conducting strategic scenario planning sessions to develop and prepare for the most probable scenarios and corresponding action plans.

**2.** The number of independent exiled media workers is set to increase as the governments in Belarus and Russia continue to restrict free reporting. This forces more Belarusians and Russians to flee their countries of origin. At the same time, the relocation of individual professionals would most likely not compensate for the general shortage of human resources among the exiled independent media. In exile, media teams address the challenges of relocation by creating new independent media projects and constantly experimenting with new formats and tones of voice. With funding prospects uncertain, significant transformations are expected, including professional migration within the media sector. As larger independent media organisations consolidate in exile, it remains unclear whether smaller media teams will have the resilience to withstand the pressures they face. This uncertainty is strengthened by fear among the independent Belarusian exiled media sector about media management's ability

to secure stable financial support and retain existing human resources.

**3.** Financial support for independent exiled media may decrease, resulting in the strengthening of larger independent media teams, and smaller media projects being unable to survive. Many independent media outlets will struggle to establish sustainable business models and will remain heavily reliant on donor funding. In the long run, this situation will present a dilemma for support providers: Whether to continue backing large-scale independent media that are improving commercial sustainability or to refocus on smaller and medium-sized independent media, which have less potential to diversify their income and are frozen in survival mode. Donors and implementers need to be more proactive in assisting with developing business models and providing operational support among independent Belarusian exiled media, especially considering that they have not only managed to continue serving their audiences but, in some respects, have ‘outperformed their global peers’.<sup>119</sup> With the dramatically shrinking space for civil society and political activism in Belarus and Russia, the contribution of independent media to the resilience of Belarusian and Russian citizens to state propaganda may soon become the sole pillar on which this resilience stands.

**4.** Many independent exiled media outlets have successfully completed the legalisation stage in their host countries, benefiting from the systematic stabilisation of procedures and assistance provided by CSOs. In light of potential new legal restrictions in these host countries, independent exiled media that have already received initial legalisation support are likely to continue receiving assistance from CSOs. However, upcoming waves of relocation, particularly involving many Russian and some Belarusian independent

media from outside the EU, will necessitate updates to legal assistance approaches and policy advocacy.

**5.** The capacity and operation of independent Belarusian and Russian media in exile remain heavily reliant on financial support as a fundamental need. However, this study has identified an additional gap: The lack of educational opportunities for project managers, fundraisers, and new journalists. Without formal and informal education for Belarusian and Russian journalists in exile, the diaspora's potential as a primary resource for new talent remains underutilised. The composition of independent exiled media teams reveals a weak capacity to differentiate roles and functions due to a shortage of skilled personnel. To address these issues, CSOs should enhance their capacity-building efforts by addressing these gaps through educational initiatives for new journalists and correspondents, as well as by providing comprehensive training in project management.

**6.** Our study findings suggest that mental health challenges should be viewed more broadly, encompassing overall wellbeing to ensure that support for independent exiled media is multifaceted. This support needs to address psychological needs, traumatic experiences, and emergency incidents. It also needs to offer approaches tailored towards the specific needs of people of marginalised gender identities. A more effective approach would involve restructuring wellbeing support into two main categories: Prevention and treatment. By focusing on the introduction of prevention programmes related to mental health, the demand for treatment of burn-out and trauma will be reduced. This assistance can be distributed among support providers to maximise effectiveness, with a centralised hotline for emergency cases managed collaboratively by multiple organisations.

<sup>119</sup> Lithuania declares more than 1,000 Belarusians and Russians to be national security risks, AP News, 4 August 2023



**7.** The needs of independent exiled media can be distinctly divided into individual and organisational levels. Adopting the above-proposed needs framework could aid in distributing responsibilities among CSOs and in effectively tailoring support. The coordination challenges highlighted by CSOs in this study could be addressed through a strategy of shared responsibilities. The partial outsourcing of administrative and management duties, in the form of a centralised, co-managed service hub, could help CSOs to improve the effectiveness of the assistance they provide for exiled media. This kind of hub would have a positive impact on both service provision for media and coordination among CSOs.

**8.** Given that the role of Big Tech in content distribution and audience outreach has emerged as a significant support gap for exiled independent media, there is a need for increased advocacy to engage with these companies. This involves exploring new avenues of cooperation and advocating for the specific needs of exiled media in terms of product, technology and digital support. Firstly, exiled media need support in advocating for more favourable algorithmic policies from Big Tech. This includes facilitating connections with these companies and representing exiled media interests on international platforms where these companies are present. Secondly, there is a need for media organisations to enhance their audience outreach strategies and strategic planning to maintain their existing audiences.



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## Methodological approach

This report is designed as a case study with a comparative perspective, focusing on Belarusian and Russian media in exile across five host countries: Czechia, Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland. The research was conducted in several stages. Firstly, researchers mapped Belarusian and Russian media outlets in these five countries. The mapping results illustrate the ecosystem of media organisations that have relocated from Belarus or Russia to these countries. Secondly, the research team reviewed the media and civil society landscape in each host country. Thirdly, a survey was conducted among 44 media representatives in exile—22 from Belarus and 22 from Russia—to outline their needs, challenges, and working conditions in the host countries.

Fourthly, a series of interviews were conducted with 17 representatives from media in exile, including relocated journalists, representatives of journalists' associations, and heads of media organisations that have relocated Belarusian or Russian correspondents. Finally, 14 interviews were held with civil society organisations (CSOs) that assist journalists in exile across one or several host countries. Snowball sampling was used as a strategy for interviewing respondents, and over 50 potential respondents were contacted. Interview requests were sent to organisations and media identified during the mapping stage, and existing contacts were leveraged to ensure the desired number of respondents. Interviews were conducted online via ZOOM or Google Meets, and the transcripts were analysed using NVivo 14.

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