



POLICY BRIEF



Kristdemokratiskt Internationellt Center
Christian Democratic International Center

Voices in exile

Supporting Activists in Times
of Shrinking Democratic Space

ENoP
EUROPEAN NETWORK OF
POLITICAL FOUNDATIONS

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FOREWORD BY THE CHAIRPERSON

Working to empower democratic movements in dictatorships and repressive contexts is always about supporting people driven by the belief that each of us can make a difference. Those who take the fight for democracy and freedom do so at an elevated risk to their safety and the safety of their family and friends. Sometimes, the situation becomes so dangerous that they find themselves left with no other choice but to leave the country they love. For someone who has spent years supporting local activists promoting democracy, freedom and human rights, this breakup can be perceived as a resignation. It hurts to see one's heroes' surrender.

Over the years, however, we have learnt that the fight can continue from exile. Threats, harassment, and persecution may push the activists out of their beloved homeland but their fight for freedom continues. Sometimes the fight can be carried out more efficiently from exile. In such scenarios where activists are speaking for their beloved homeland from exile, the friends of democracy must understand their critical role of supporting these 'voices in exile'. The following policy brief is thus a humble attempt by the Christian Democratic International Center to highlight how policymakers in Europe can support the voices in exile.



Elisabet Lann

Chairperson

Christian Democratic International Centre

SWEDEN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

6

Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 Overview

1.2 Authors' Biography

Rahima Mahmut, Finn Lau, Edipcia Dubón, Victory Tabolich, Volha Damaskina.

19

Chapter II: Socio-Political Realities in Select Countries

Rahima Mahmut, Finn Lau, Edipcia Dubón, Victory Tabolich,
Volha Damaskina. Edited by Omer Noor and Idah Knowles.

33

Chapter III: Policy Suggestions & Recommendations

Rahima Mahmut, Finn Lau, Edipcia Dubón, Victory Tabolich,
Volha Damaskina. Edited by Omer Noor and Idah Knowles.

CHAPTER I: Introduction

1.1 OVERVIEW

The aim of this policy brief is to strengthen the voices of activists working from exile by documenting their struggle and putting forward their suggestions to policy makers in Europe in relation to defending human rights in their respective countries. It focuses on three countries China, Belarus, and Nicaragua. The choice of these countries is motivated by KIC's experience of working / engaging with activists from these countries, their renewed relevance in global politics and last but not the least the deteriorating human rights conditions in these countries. All the three countries are characterized as authoritarian regimes by the Economist's intelligence unit.

Over the years, KIC has formally worked with activists from Belarus and Nicaragua which has provided KIC a unique insight into the human rights situation in these countries. It has also led KIC to realize that several critical actors be it members of banned political parties or civil rights activists have been pushed into exile and require assistance. In this dark hour of shrinking democratic space the beacons of hope glowing from exile must be supported so that they continue working as a line of defence against absolute totalitarianism.

The policy brief comprises of three chapters. The first chapter provides the readers a brief background of the activists and the work they are currently doing, followed by a chapter on the existing human rights conditions in the chosen countries while the last chapter provides concrete policy recommendations to the European policy makers.

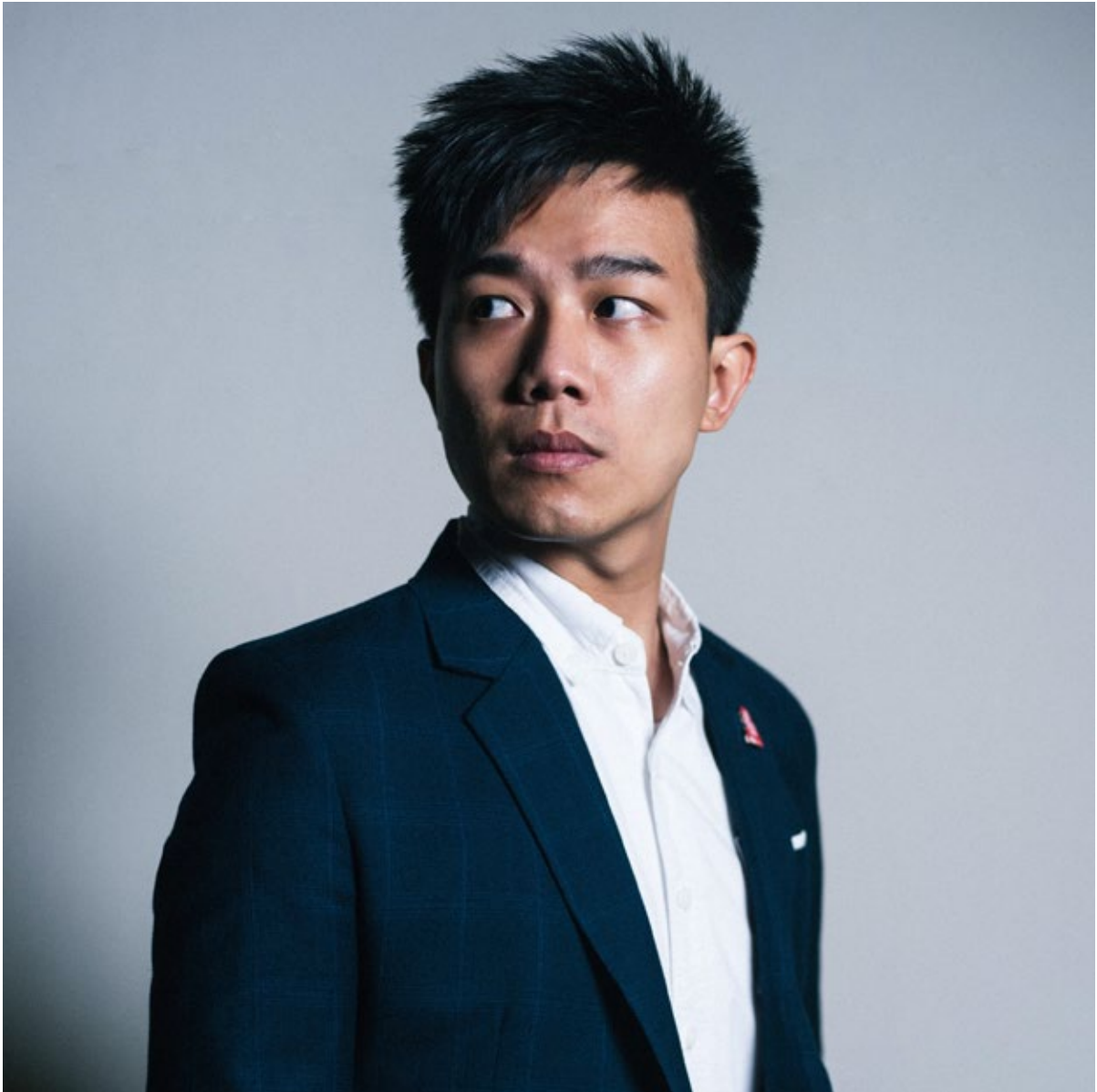


1.2 AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

RAHIMA MAHMUT

Rahima Mahmut is an exiled human rights activist, a London-based Uyghur singer, and an award-winning translator of the poignant prison memoir 'The Land Drenched in Tears' by Soyungul Chanishe. The book converses the history of the tumultuous years of modern China under Mao's rule, witnessed, experienced, and told through the personal lens of an ethnic minority woman.

Currently, Rahima is serving as the U.K. Director for the World Uyghur Congress, a human rights organisation whose head office is in Munich, Germany. She is also the Executive Director of 'The Stop Uyghur Genocide,' a UK-based campaign aiming to end the genocide against the Uyghur people. As a singer in a band called "SOS Collective," Rahima also uses the medium of music, art, and poetry to highlight the plight of the Uyghurs. She is also the advisor to the Inter-Parliamentary Alliance of China (IPAC), where she provides information and support on Uyghur issues. Rahima has provided valuable insight into this policy brief through an online interview with KIC.



FINN LAU

Finn Lau was born on 25th October 1993, he is a political activist from Hong Kong known for popularising a protesting strategy coined, “Lam Chau” and is the founder of Hong Kong Liberty and Stand with Hong Kong movement. He is an advocate-in-exile and one of the 2019 Hong Kong movement leaders officially wanted by the Hong Kong authority. Finn was detained under inhumane conditions in Hong Kong and was beaten to near death by Chinese Communist Party agents in London in 2020. He underpinned key strategies for the Hong Kong movement and launched global initiatives throughout 2019-22 addressing Hong Kong and China democracy and human rights issues.

As a Chartered UK professional, Finn also specialises in infrastructure development with working experience across Hong Kong, Singapore, and London in addition to his policy advocacy work across multiple Parliaments like the Swedish, Danish, Swiss, UK, Canadian and European Parliament. He has provided valuable insight to this policy brief by sharing his struggle as an activist through a chapter on Hongkong.



EDIPCIA DUBÓN

Edipcia Dubón is an ex-member of parliament (MP) from Nicaragua currently living in exile in Costa Rica. As an MP, she represented the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS).

She is a pro-democracy and women’s rights advocate, and a coordinator of Dialogue of Women for Democracy, a think tank that promotes open discussions about the challenges faced by women in Nicaragua. She is also an economist with a focus on macroeconomics and holds a master’s degree in applied politics.

Her term as an MP ended when she along with twenty-seven other opposition leaders refused to accept the Supreme Court’s decision of replacing Eduardo Montea-
legre, the then vice president of the opposition party called the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), with Pedro Reyes Vallejos on the behest of President Daniel Ortega. Members of the PLI and MRS refused to acknowledge Reyes as the leader because he was viewed as a puppet of the Ortega regime. To punish these opposition legislators Nicaragua’s Supreme Electoral Council ordered to remove them from the National Assembly and empowered Reyes to select their replacements.

Edipcia is currently serving as a member of the Executive Committee of the Latin American Youth Network for Democracy. She graciously agreed to pen down the chapter on Nicaragua for this policy brief.



VICTORY TABOLICH

Victory Tabolich is a Belarusian human rights and democracy activist and a member of the now-banned Movement for Freedom (MFF). Victory has vast experience in serving democracy in Belarus in various capacities. This includes coordination of election observation training on matters of free and fair elections, striving for policy reforms that would ensure improving the living conditions of Belarusians in line with the European standards and the subsequent integration of Belarus into the European Union and being elected as a member of the training council of the MMF.

In the aftermath of the 2020 elections, Alexander Lukashenko had a hard clamp down against voices of dissent that were demanding transparency, accountability, and respect for human rights in Belarus. On December 9, 2020, at around 6 a.m. a group of KGB officers invaded Victory's home and brought her for questioning at the Directorate of the Investigative Committee of the Republic of Belarus where she was coerced into taking a polygraph test and into signing a non-disclosure agreement without the presence of her lawyer. The interrogation lasted for several hours on questions concerning her personal life and her work in MFF. Upon being released she went into exile on the same day. She currently lives in Poland under protection where she is engaged in educational programmes aimed at highlighting the conditions in Belarus and the Belarusian refugees in Poland.

Victory has studied at the Institute of Parliamentarism and Entrepreneurship, Faculty of Socio-Economic Studies in Belarus, with a specialty in Political Science. She has penned down the chapter on Belarus along with her other colleague from MMF Ms Volha Damaskina.



VOLHA DAMASKINA

Volha Damaskina is also a member of the Movement for Freedom (MFF) in Belarus. She has been actively participating in Belarusian politics in various capacities since 1994. This among other things includes participating in elections as a candidate, observing polling stations and organising campaigns and rallies to name a few. She has also been a member of the civic association – the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) “Revival” (Adradzhennie). Since 2006, she has been an active member of the human rights & educational civic association ‘Movement for Freedom acting as an elected member of the National Council and a coordinator in the Vitebsk region.

In 2016, she founded an NGO, the Information and Cultural Centre “InitiArt”. The organisation implemented the “Living Language” (Zhivaya Mova) project in Polotsk, which was aimed at popularising the Belarusian language in the region and, the “Women’s Language” (Mova Zhanchyn) project for active women in the region who have leadership potential. It was dissolved in June 2021 by the decision of the executive committee of the city of Novopolotsk. In 2020-2021, the law enforcers conducted several searches of her apartment, seized the data storage devices, and detained her son on several occasions. After numerous police domiciliary visits, her son and his wife managed to leave for Ukraine, and later to Poland. In December 2021, Volha Damaskina left Belarus for Poland where she applied for International Protection. She is currently waiting for the decision on her application.

CHAPTER II: Socio-Political Realities in Select Countries

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

The following chapter provides a brief overview of the human rights conditions in select countries as viewed through the lens of the activists in exile.

2.1 China

In this section, we highlight the human rights situation of Uyghurs living in Xinjiang province and China's assault on the freedom of people living in Hong Kong.

a) Xinjiang: An Open-Air Prison

Since time immemorial, the diversity of thought, culture and language has been a threat to dictators and authoritarian regimes. As George Orwell famously stated in his novel 1984 "Orthodoxy means not thinking-not needing to think. Orthodoxy is

unconsciousness”. The case of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) which thrives on absolute submission to the party’s ideology is no different. The paranoia of non-assimilation and independence of Uyghurs, who have a different culture, language and religious identity in Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China has led CCP to commit gross human rights violations.

The Xinjiang region lies in the northwest of China. In theory, like Tibet, it is meant to be autonomous, meaning some degree of self-governance but in practice, it is completely under the clutches of the central government. The region is of great economic and geopolitical importance to China. It is rich in natural resources like oil, gas, coal, cotton, lithium, and zinc. Geopolitically, it is in the heart of Central Asia- bordering countries like Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan. The paranoia of independence in this important region has led CCP to use all means possible to ensure orthodoxy in the region. This includes the introduction of measures such as “re-education camps” where Uyghurs are forcefully separated from their families and indoctrinated with “pan-Chinese” ideology, systematic use of rape to force Uyghur women to “assimilate” with ethnic Chinese men and forced labour for men in concentration camps to name a few measures all under the pretext of assimilation. It is like living inside an “open prison” says Rahima.

“In 2014, when President Xi Jinping visited the region, he noticed that the Uyghurs still dressed in their clothes, spoke their language, and practised Islam. In some of his speeches, he expressed fury, he stated we (Chinese) have been here for almost 70 years. Why have these people still not changed? Why are they still living as quite different people?” recalls Rahima.

The gross human rights violations are officially denied by the Chinese government but are well documented in various reports. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights began receiving reports from civil society about missing members of the Uyghur Muslim community in 2017 but as Rahima recalls in an interview with KIC, the clamp down on Uyghurs has been taking place for decades right from the time of the Qing dynasty to modern-day China under the CCP, forcing those who had the means to flee the country to do so. A similar incident forced Rahima to flee her hometown of Ghulja in 1997.

On 5th February 1997, a peaceful protest was organized by the Uyghur community living in Ghulja city, calling for an end to the ethnic and religious discrimination in the city. The Protest was met by brute force by the Chinese army, scores of protestors were gunned down and many were arbitrarily arrested. According to Rahima, more than a hundred people were gunned down that day, but it received little attention in the international media at the time. The hunt for those who were associated with the protests in one way, or another lasted for months. Family members of those present at the protests were also arrested and threatened. The Uyghur community to this day is asking for an independent investigation of what became known as the Ghulja massacre. For activists like Rahima, the Ghulja massacre was the harbinger of the more severe persecution of their community.

“I came to the U.K in 2000, the reason I left my country was the 1997 Ghulja massacre. The extra-judicial killing of hundreds of Uyghurs triggered my decision to leave my country. They wouldn’t spare anyone, and I could not bear the thought of them (CCP) picking up my son one day.” Said Rahima Mahmut.

It is important to highlight here that very few Uyghurs have so far managed to flee the country. An overwhelming majority are completely incarcerated in the region and therefore can hardly flee. Compared to other refugees, there is no substantial number of Uyghur refugees coming into Europe or the United States. There is a call for Amnesty International to intervene considering the long interview wait to enter countries like the UK. This makes it even more important for international human rights organisations and policymakers to provide support to activists like Rahima who can play a major role in strengthening the cause of their people in exile.



Uyghur farmers picking cotton by hand.

b) Hong Kong

With 7.5 million residents, Hong Kong is a country where the West meets the East since 1841 and used to be part of the free world. While millions of people in Europe were freed from the authoritarian rule of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Hong Kong fell into the hands of the Chinese Communist Party in 1997. Under Beijing's military threat for decades, the 1997 Hong Kong Handover took place between the UK and China without holding a referendum to consult Hongkongers. In principle, Hong Kong is protected by the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration which is an international treaty lodged at the United Nations (UN). The treaty specified that Hong Kong would be guaranteed at least 50 years of civil liberties, an independent judiciary system, autonomy, and democracy after 1997.

Since then, Hong Kong has been undermined by the Chinese Communist Party in the aspects of civil liberties, independent judiciary system, autonomy, and democracy simultaneously while Hong Kong's unique language, culture and identity are also being eradicated at an accelerated speed. A Beijing-controlled Provisional Legislative Council was set up during the Handover period which rolled back almost all democratic reforms introduced by the United Kingdom (UK). Worse still, although the Chinese Communist Party promised to grant universal suffrage to Hong Kong under the city's mini constitution called the "Basic Law," the Chinese Communist Party scrapped its legal obligation completely in 2014 by imposing an autocratic, disqualification framework onto Hong Kong which enables Beijing to shortlist and handpick its favorable political candidates. This sparked the large-scale 2014 Umbrella Revolution that lasted for almost three months. In 2017, China bluntly claimed that the Sino-British Joint Declaration was a historical document only, paving way for its repeated breaches of the international treaty.

In 2019, the Hong Kong authority took a step further to introduce the draconian extradition Bill which would allow China to extradite any Hong Kong dissidents into China without any trials, effectively removing the last security system between the two different judicial systems and severely crushing Hong Kong's civil society. As such, more than two million Hongkongers (1 out of 3.75 residents) took to the streets to fight and stand against the world's second-largest economic power. The protests lasted for a year but were later disrupted and ended abruptly by the COVID-19 pandemic that spread from China to Hong Kong in late January 2020.

Taking the window of opportunity brought forth by the pandemic, Beijing bypassed the Hong Kong Legislative Council and imposed the draconian National Security Law directly in late June 2020 when the world was heavily occupied by overseeing the pandemic crisis. Under the draconian National Security Law, Hong Kong lost the top three independent media outlets, including the last pro-democracy newspaper – Apple Daily – within seven months. More than fifty Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) were forcibly shut down in the city, including Amnesty International which used to use Hong Kong as its regional headquarters for human rights advocacy and campaigning.

As of 2022, Hong Kong has made more than 10,000 police arrests. With more than 1,000 political prisoners, the latest figure for the total length of sentenced political imprisonment is around 770 years, which is even longer than those in Iran. The total length of sentenced imprisonment is expected to grow as only around one-third of the

political arrests have completed their legal trial procedures as of Q4 2022. Currently, all prominent pro-democracy figures are either imprisoned, prosecuted or in exile.

In essence, Hong Kong is unique in its struggles for human rights since it is standing up against the second-largest economic power in the world. Hong Kong was the new West Berlin before June 2020; it is, however, the new East Berlin now. Despite being brutally suppressed, with the waking up of democratic countries since 2019 towards the rise of Xi Jinping’s dictatorship and autocratic rule of China, Hongkongers are still resisting subtly in the city and proactively outside the city in the hope that Hong Kong could be freed like the Baltic states and East Berlin soon.



A solidarity march for Hong Kong

2.2 Nicaragua

At the beginning of the 20th century, Nicaragua was under a dictatorship. In 1909, the 16-year dictatorship of General Zelaya was overthrown by an armed uprising, which led to a foreign military intervention that lasted until 1933. A year later, the Somoza family dynasty took over and their rule lasted 45 years until 1979 when it was overthrown after an armed insurrection. During the 1980s, another civil war broke out, between the Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas, with the aggravating factor that Nicaragua was a pawn in the Cold War.

Following the rocky period characterised by dictatorships, wars, immense loss of lives and foreign military interventions, peace prevailed in the 1990 elections following arduous negotiations between warring sides. Respect for the popular vote was the key to beginning a transition process that made it possible to bring peace to the country and lay the foundations for a democratic regime for the first time in Nicaragua's history.

In 2007, Daniel Ortega took office as President of Nicaragua and began a systematic process of tearing down fundamental pillars of representative democracy. The rule of law was eliminated; the will of the people was circumvented through repeated electoral fraud; elected representatives (members of Parliament, mayors, and councillors) were arbitrarily removed from office; citizens' rights and freedoms, including the right to life, were violated; political organisations were outlawed; the independence of the branches of state was annulled, and the armed forces became subordinate to Ortega's will.

For a certain period, the regime managed to escape the scrutiny of the international community. Governments and international organisations were aware of Ortega's excesses but focused their attention more on other countries, such as Venezuela. The apparent passivity of the Nicaraguan population due to fear of persecution facilitated the consolidation of power for the regime. This passivity was taken as a sign of support. However, the accumulation of economic, political, and social grievances finally exceeded the patience of the people and a peaceful rebellion led by the country's youth broke out on 18th of April 2018. This rebellion began as a direct response to the imposition of untenable reforms to the social security system, which at that point was nearly bankrupt due to corruption and mismanagement of assets.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), as well as the Special Follow-up Mechanism for Nicaragua (MESENI) and the Interdisciplinary Group of Independent Experts of Nicaragua (GIEI - Nicaragua), have provided a thorough report of the regime. In their report of 22nd August 2022, they noted that a total of 355 people, including 15 women and 340 men, were killed between 18th of April 2018 and 31st of July 2019.

The IACHR also identified twenty-seven children and/or adolescent victims of the crisis and twenty-three police officers. While it appears to be a report depicting a gruesome war, there was no war. In addition to the killings, injuries and disappearances, the report states that there were acts amounting to crimes against humanity in the following words: “illegal and arbitrary detentions; practices of torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, censorship and attacks on the press and other forms of intimidation such as threats, harassment and persecution, all aimed at dissolving protests and inhibiting citizen participation”.

It also clearly indicates that the repression was conducted by the national police, its anti-riot forces, and para-police groups. More brutally, the regime used public hospitals as a means of repression as they refused to receive and treat the wounded following orders from their superiors. The magnitude of the repression and human rights violations led a large part of the international community to realise that a dictatorship had been in place in Nicaragua for years. However, it is hard to believe that there are still some sectors that refuse to accept this reality. For example, some academic sectors continue to use sweetened terms such as “competitive authoritarianism” or a “hybrid regime” to characterise the Ortega regime. This is essential considering the vital role played by academia towards the realisation of a democratic society.

With his fiercest opponents behind bars, President Ortega won a fourth consecutive term in the election in 2021. He has been in power without interruption since 2007. In February 2022 his regime released 222 political prisoners it was holding in jail and deported them to the United States. Among those released were politicians that had planned to run against Ortega in the 2021 elections but were jailed in the run up to the elections. The released prisoners were stripped of their citizenship. Similarly, in a separate development the regime stripped citizenship of 94 prominent dissidents. This included award winning writer Sergio Ramirez and Edipcia herself. They were declared “traitors to the fatherland”. It appears that both the deportation of the prisoners and stripping of citizenships is a systematic approach used by the regime to keep

opposing voices out of Nicaraguan politics. This again highlights the importance of supporting Nicaraguan diaspora in exile.

There are also more than two hundred Nicaraguan men and women, including all the presidential candidates of the mock election in November 2021, currently imprisoned for no legal reason other than demanding freedoms and rights. The media has also not been left out. Dozens of media outlets have been occupied or shut down, more than 120 journalists have been forced to flee into exile, and more than 2,000 civil society organisations have been stripped of their legal status, their assets confiscated, and, in some cases, their managers and employees imprisoned. The regime has even gone further to trample on religious freedom, with a Catholic bishop being imprisoned and still unaccounted for, while several priests are on trial, and others have fled into exile. Likewise, scientists, professionals, religious leaders, feminist leaders, musicians, academics, and citizens, in general, are arbitrarily prevented from entering Nicaragua.

International organisations such as the IACHR, the United Nations Human Rights Council, the Organisation of American States (OAS) and the European Union have repeatedly condemned these repressive actions and demanded the release of political prisoners and the re-establishment of freedoms. Moreover, various countries like Spain, Argentina, Mexico, Chile, Colombia, and Canada have tried to promote spaces for dialogue to no avail. Even the Vatican's efforts have failed. The regime has responded with insults, disparaging remarks and, in the extreme, the expulsion of the Spanish Ambassador, the European Union Ambassador and the Pope's representative.

Those in exile face many challenges regarding material aspects, survival and, depending on the person's way of life, viability as a professional, entrepreneur, self-employed person or as a salaried worker or student in the host country. They also face obstacles in all these fields: to become qualified professionals, to be an economic subject such as an entrepreneur, to find decent jobs as salaried employees, or to be accepted on equal terms at universities or schools. Concerning the legal dimension, migration status is an obstacle, as there are difficulties in moving within the territory of the host country or abroad. In many cases, because of the hasty way in which people are forced to leave, they do not have identification documents, which makes the situation worse. It is also a problem when identification documents, such as passports, expire.

The emotional aspect is underestimated. The impact of uprooting and family estran-

gement is a constant burden that affects emotional stability. Here, it is imperative to emphasise and give a voice to the voiceless, which are the children. First, children who are forced to move with their parents in precarious conditions, without understanding the reasons. In addition to being separated from their social spaces i.e., school and family environment, these children face problems with fitting into schools, adapting to the culture and customs of the host countries, and social isolation. On the other hand, some children stay behind because their parents had to take the difficult decision to leave the country, leaving them in the care of family or friends.



May 2018: March demanding justice for the victims murdered in April 2018 by the police and parapolice forces of Daniel Ortega’s regime.

2.3 Belarus

The socio-political and human rights condition in Belarus is getting worse by the day. Over the past two years, state authorities have been actively using criminal and administrative prosecution against Belarusian citizens for political reasons, and now those who oppose the war in Ukraine are also subjected to prosecution. The number of political prisoners is growing with each passing month. As of today, there are 1,428 political prisoners in Belarus, and an increasing number of people get thrown into jail every day. Activists and citizens who speak out against the war and current regime get up to 25 years in prison. It is also worth noting that Belarus is the only European country where the use of the death penalty is legal, and the list of those who can be subjected to the death penalty has been expanded by the latest amendments to Belarusian legislation.

The use of torture and force is well documented by observers. The current regime has adopted the practice of coercing detained persons into a false confession. The testimonies of citizens who slander and discredit themselves are recorded on a video for further distribution through various communication channels, including the national television of Belarus. Smartphones, laptops, and other such equipment are subjected to routine screening without due process. Any hesitation on part of the owner leads to the risk of getting arrested or beaten up.

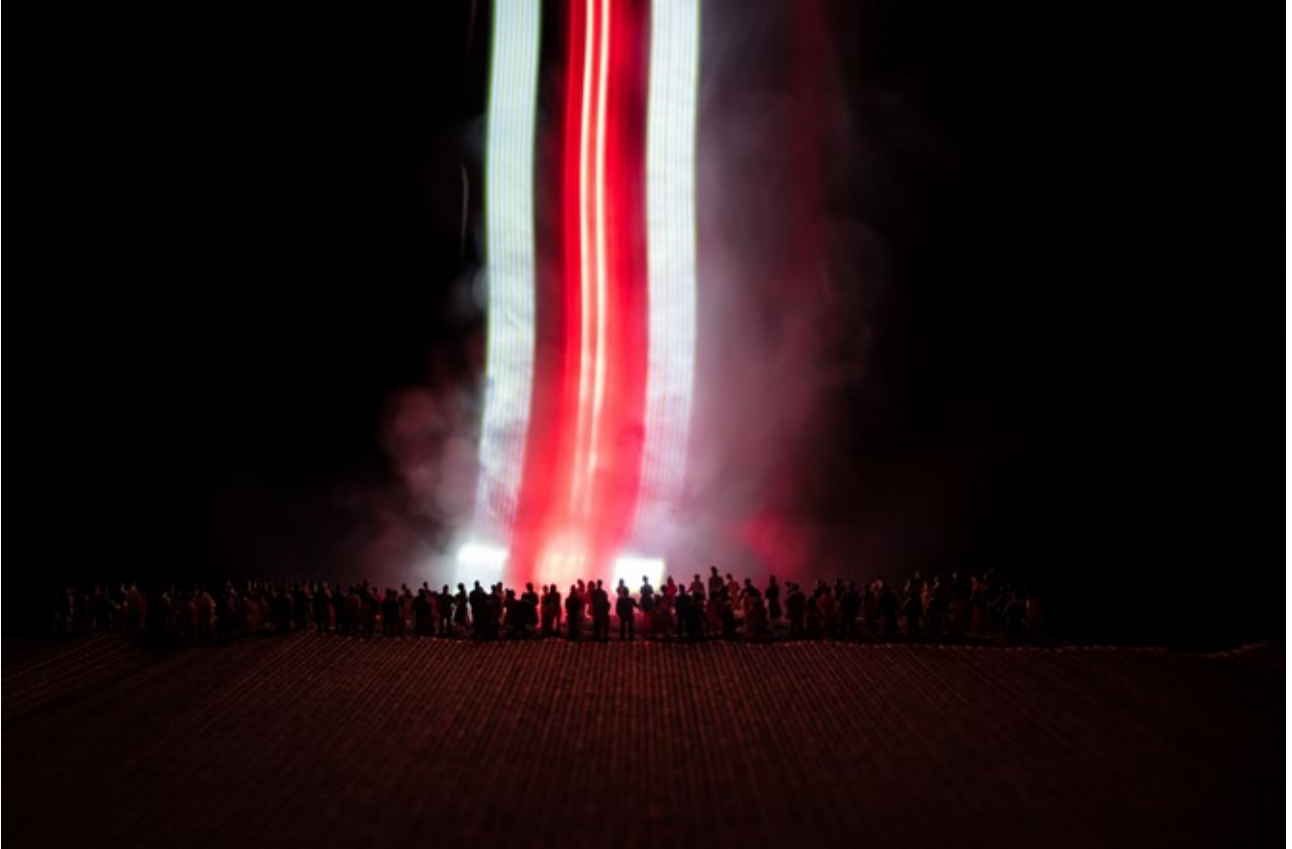
The Russian invasion of Ukraine has been going on since February 2022. The Russian troops stationed in Belarus and its territories have been used for conducting military operations. Belarusian citizens are being imprisoned for expressing their condemnation of the illegal actions of the Russian military, law enforcement agencies and other state authorities. Since the 2020 presidential election, the opposition has not been allowed a single mass event by the Belarusian authorities. The restriction on public has been extended to even neutral meetings such as religious gatherings in certain churches that are perceived to be hostile to the regime.

In this tough time of repression at home members of the Belarusian civil society and opposition are finding it difficult to leave the country. There seems to be a tendency in the international community of equating the actions of the state with those who are seeking refuge from state atrocities. Some countries have announced that they would stop issuing visas and opening bank accounts for Belarusian citizens.

For many Belarusians, the opportunity to get a visa and leave the country is their only chance to avoid a long prison sentence for speaking out against the war or for the simple act of posting a photo with the national “white-red-white flag”. There are also reports of Belarusians living abroad being fired from their jobs who are not necessarily supportive of Lukashenko’s regime but are seen with suspicion. People who have managed to escape from the regime to other countries such as Poland are faced with other set of problems. These include psychological problems related to trauma and leaving behind their family members at the mercy of the regime. There are other socio economic problems such as finding employment in a new a country without knowing the language of the host country, getting used to new conditions, legalisation procedures, and the healthcare system. All of these are significant challenges that require assistance of the relevant authorities in the host country.

Political refugees are facing a pressing problem of unemployment even though the majority of those who fled from Lukashenko’s regime obtained a university degree and extensive work experience and are specialists in certain fields. Noting that finding a job that matches one’s qualifications is an impossible task in Poland, even with the capability to speak Polish, Refugees opt to often accept low-paying jobs, most of which are hard physical work. Since the labour market in Poland is mainly oriented towards male labour or seasonal labour, many women, especially those aged fifty and older, have great difficulty finding a job. The situation has become even worse with the outbreak of war in Ukraine.

Human rights activists and journalists continue to receive information about the inhuman treatment of detainees in pretrial detention facilities. Citizens who were detained or arrested for political reasons are kept in overcrowded detention cells with no medical care or inmate packages. Some detention facilities adopted the practice of putting yellow tags on the clothes of political prisoners, which leads to further worsening of their detention conditions. On May 21, a political prisoner, and a member of the National Council of the Movement “For Freedom” Vitold Ashurok died in Shklov city Correctional facility No. 17. According to Ashurok’s relatives, he was subjected to inhuman treatment and died due to non-provision of medical assistance.



Belarus presidential election protests. White and red colored light as a symbol of the flag of Belarus and resistance towards the regime.

CHAPTER III: Policy Suggestions & Recommendations

In this final chapter, we present recommendations to policymakers based on the input of the activists living in exile and KIC's experience of democracy assistance.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON CHINA

a. Uyghur Region

1. Policymakers should recognise that what is happening to the Uyghurs and the other Turkic people in the Xinjiang region is genocide and should fulfil their responsibility and commitments under the 1948 genocide convention.

2. China should be pressurised diplomatically to allow independent media and human rights organisations access to the Xinjiang region. This would in turn put pressure on China to treat Uyghurs according to the universally accepted human rights standards.

3. A boycott of forced labour products must be enforced particularly cotton imported from China. Reports suggest that Uyghur men are forced to work in cotton fields. The cotton exported from these fields is often used by major fashion brands in the U.S and Europe and accounts for one-fifth of the world's cotton supply.
4. China is using high-tech surveillance technology to round up, monitor, incarcerate, and strip people of their freedoms. Countries should ban those technological companies that are involved in these atrocities, for instance, Huawei and Hikvision cameras as per the Big Brother Watch report.
5. Policymakers in their official engagements with China must emphasise the autonomous status of the Xinjiang region and the right of self-determination of the Uyghurs.
6. Considering that very few Uyghurs have managed to leave China, those that have managed should be given automatic asylum.
7. Host countries should take measures to unite the families of the Uyghurs living in exile as reports show that children are often stranded in different countries waiting to be reunited with their parents.
8. Uyghur activists and their organisations can play a key role in terms of giving evidence-based policy suggestions to European policy makers to engage China more effectively. This includes engaging international organisations such as the World Uyghur Congress and Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China.
9. Governments today appear to be reluctant to oppose China due to their economic dependency. Policymakers in the long run should try and reduce their economic dependency on China through a collaborated effort of countries like Australia, New Zealand, the US, and the EU to counter China.
10. Activists should also be supported with funding for their awareness creation work in support of the Uyghurs community.

b. Hong Kong

1. On 20th January 2022, the European Parliament passed a resolution on violations of fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong (2022/2503(RSP)), calling on the European Commission, Council and EU member states to “address the enforcement of the NSL as a top priority on the agenda of all EU-China meetings” and “to introduce targeted sanctions under the EU Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime (the EU’s Magnitsky-style sanctions) against the Hong Kong and PRC officials responsible for the ongoing human rights crackdown”. Consequently, the European Parliament and Commission should hold public and/or private hearings on the situation in Hong Kong to maintain international pressure on the Chinese Communist Party.

2. In response to the promulgation of the Hong Kong National Security Law, Finland, Ireland, and the Netherlands suspended their respective extradition agreements with Hong Kong in 2020. However, two EU member states namely Czech Republic and Portugal still uphold the extradition agreements with Hong Kong. These agreements are a threat to lives of activists living in Czech Republic and Portugal. EU policy makers should thus highlight the dangers of this treaty and convince Czech Republic and Portugal to review or revoke their extradition treaty.

3. European Parliamentarians should also consider the possibility of forming a cross-party parliamentary group on Hong Kong in their respective national parliaments to maintain the pressure and momentum on Hong Kong and China-related issues. The autonomous status of Hong Kong must be emphasised in all dealing with China.

4. The seeping in of the NSL into all aspects of society as a mechanism to restrain opposition voices must be highlighted and condemned by European policy makers and international legal analysts.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON NICARAGUA

1. Policy makers should support capacity building programmes aimed at activists and politicians that have been forced into exile. Political party affiliated programmes like the ones funded by Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) have played a key role in the past to build the capacity of activists and member of political parties living in exile. It is vital that support through such programmes is sustained. This would ensure that when the conditions are ripe these activists can return home with the necessary tools to play their part in strengthening the democracy at home.

2. Sustainable ways of supporting the Nicaraguan population in exile must be prioritized. This includes supporting the work of Nicaraguan civil society organisations in exile which have strived to support political exiles and forced migrants. Ensuring that these organisations are self-sufficient in the long run is vital to the cause of democracy in Nicaragua.

3. Policy makers must put pressure on the Ortega government to abide by international law and end the reprisal and prosecution of the opposition. Stripping activists, politicians, writers, and members of civil society of their citizenship must be condemned at the highest level including in United Nations and in the bilateral engagements of the European countries with Nicaragua.

4. Host countries like Costa Rica have taken the brunt of immigrants moving out of Nicaragua. Due to economic challenges and lack of resources it is unrealistic to expect countries like Costa Rica to provide sustainable support to the immigrants. Therefore, international community, including financial institutions and cooperating governments, must find suitable ways to ensure that the Costa Rican government and institutions have the resources to support assistance programmes for the exiled population.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS ON BELARUS

1. In the aftermath of the Ukraine war, it is important that policymakers make a distinction between the pro-democracy Belarusians and the pro-Russia regime. The decision of Lukashenko to support Russia should not lead to the stigmatization of Belarusians seeking refuge abroad.
2. Policymakers should request their respective parliaments to have regular hearings on Belarus's situation. International human rights organizations and policymakers should work together to highlight the plight of political prisoners in Belarus.
3. According to the activists, the most pressing problem is the unwillingness of European prosecutors to launch criminal cases against individuals that are known to defend Lukashenko's regime under the pretext that they cannot be tried in absentia. However, human rights defenders from many European countries are convinced that the absence of an accused person in the country does not present an obstacle to initiating a criminal case at the request of the victim and putting the perpetrator of the crime on the international wanted list. It is hoped and expected that the voices of those in exile will be heard by the democratic prosecutors' offices in Europe.
4. There is a risk that policymakers in Europe are mobilising the bulk of the foreign aid towards Ukraine overshadowing the needs in Belarus. The process of granting residence permits to activists should be expedited and prioritized. A denial of a residence permit implies imprisonment or death as Belarusian authorities recently passed a law allowing trials in absentia for political migrants.
5. The Belarusian passport is gradually becoming toxic. Instances of Belarusian students being refused admission to universities in some European countries are becoming more prevalent. Policymakers need to ensure that the Belarusian diaspora is not isolated.
6. A well-thought-out strategy is needed to financially support refugees in their initial few months of rehabilitation. Many refugees feel helpless without a residence permit and knowledge of the local language despite being highly educated.

7. There is a need to address excessive bureaucratic measures curtailing the day-to-day life of Belarussians living in exile. For example, it is very difficult for Belarussians to open bank accounts due to suspicion of colluding with the regime. Many Belarussian families are faced with the fact that their children cannot receive education in their native language due to bureaucratic complexities.

8. There are more than 2,600 defendants in fabricated cases and more than 1,500 eyewitness accounts of the torture of Belarussians (only the documented ones – as of October 2022). European policy makers in collaboration with international legal forums should sustain pressure on the Belarussian regime to end the prosecution of these dissidents.



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