

SPACE FOR FREEDOM

An assessment of the professional and operational requirements of exiled journalists from Belarus and Russia



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DW Akademie is conducting the Space for Freedom project as a network partner of the German government's Hannah Arendt Initiative. Through this initiative, the German Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (BKM) are supporting media professionals in crisis and conflict areas, as well as those living in exile.

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Contents

Executive summary	6
Introduction	8
Demographics and stories of exile	10
Age breakdown	10
Gender distribution	10
Country of origin	10
Journalistic focuses	10
Integration and sense of belonging	12
Intense competition for limited grant funding	14
Challenges of legalization and administrative systems	16
Navigating employment challenges in exile	17
Collaboration with relocated media	18
Barriers to collaboration with local media	19
Barriers to operational efficiency in exiled newsrooms	20
Shifting career paths	21
Emotional tolls and loss of motivation	22
Coping mechanisms in newsrooms	22
Challenges in maintaining audience engagement	24
Digital hygiene and informant connectivity	24
Assessment methodology	27
Ethical considerations	28
Limitations	28
Analysis process	28
Summary and reflections	29
Practical recommendations	30

Executive summary

This assessment was conducted as part of the Space for Freedom program implemented by DW Akademie, the Baltic Center for Media Excellence, the Sustainability Foundation and the Belarus Press Club. The paper aims to provide a comprehensive needs analysis of exiled journalists from Belarus and Russia.

Following widespread crackdowns on independent media in both countries, intensified by the 2020 Belarusian protests and Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, journalists have been forced into exile in large numbers. Despite the challenges, they remain committed to independent reporting and informing audiences both in their home countries and abroad. However, the journalists and media face significant professional, operational, legal and financial challenges in exile. The report aims to analyze this.

The assessment is based on a mixed-methods approach and combines 64 quantitative survey responses with 20 in-depth qualitative interviews. All were conducted between November 2024 and mid-January 2025. The findings provide an understanding of the key issues affecting exiled journalists and media organizations, and outline both their immediate needs and primary action points. The key areas of analysis include the following aspects:

- Many exiled journalists struggle with adaptation due to linguistic barriers, limited employment opportunities and ongoing security concerns. A significant number of respondents expressed feelings of isolation and uncertainty about their future in host countries.
- The overwhelming dependence on short-term donor funding presents a critical obstacle to financial sustainability. Most respondents identified financing as a major concern, with competition for limited grants increasing among exiled media outlets. Moreover, following the US presidential directive to suspend foreign assistance to the US Agency for International Development (USAID), dozens of independent media outlets in more than 30 countries, including those relocated from Russia and Belarus,¹ have been severely impacted.
- Issues surrounding residency permits, visa restrictions and taxation systems significantly hinder both individuals and media organizations. More than half of the journalists surveyed cited visa challenges as a persistent issue affecting their work and integration.
- Nearly half of these journalists currently work on a project-by-project basis without a stable contract. In addition, young journalists and media professionals without established reputations struggle to find work, resulting in many having to leave the journalism profession entirely.
- Most respondents reported having some cooperation with other exiled media, while only a quarter (25 percent) have successfully collaborated with local media. Language barriers, editorial priorities and limited networking opportunities hinder collaborations like these.
- Many exiled media struggle with outdated workflows, inefficient newsroom structures and a lack of digital tools and training. Less than half of the respondents indicated their newsrooms lacked the necessary technological infrastructure.
- The pressures of exile, financial instability, visa uncertainties and ongoing threats from authoritarian regimes have resulted in severe emotional distress for journalists. More than three-quarters of the journalists surveyed reported experiencing psychological stress and also expressed a need for professional psychological health support.
- Despite continued efforts to reach audiences in their home countries, the journalists and media surveyed face significant obstacles, including state censorship, the blocking of digital platforms and audience fatigue. The struggle to maintain connections with contacts inside Belarus and Russia further complicates the work of independent media in exile.

¹ "How Trump's directive will affect Belarusian media in exile", DW, 2025: <https://www.dw.com/ru/kak-ukaz-trampa-povliaet-na-rabotu-nezavisimyh-belorusskih-media/a-71478791>

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the surveys and in-person interviews were conducted prior to the US presidential directive to suspend funding for its main foreign aid agency, USAID. The immediate consequences were therefore not reflected in the responses of those surveyed. However, the freeze is expected to have a profound impact on the future financial sustainability of exiled journalists and media.

The findings highlight the urgent need for long-term financial stability as well as legal and administrative support for exiled journalists. The recommendations at the end of this paper come from recurring themes that emerged from this assessment.

Introduction

Exile and repression were extremely important elements in countries of the former Soviet Union.² Under the regime of Joseph Stalin, millions of free thinkers and system opponents were exiled to the Gulag, a vast system of labor camps for real or fictitious crimes and dissent, or were detained as propagators of disinformation. This silencing mechanism under Stalin³ was enforced towards those thought to pose a major threat. While the methods may differ from those used today, the essence of repression against independent journalism remains, as evidenced by the ongoing exodus of media professionals from Russia and Belarus.

In Belarus, Alexander Lukashenko has been in power for three decades, with his crackdown on independent media becoming increasingly severe and brutal.⁴ This has led to the forced cessation of publishing activities and the mass exodus of the few remaining independent media outlets.

The situation in Russia is similar. Since the Kremlin launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, independent and opposition journalists and media have been tied by the Kremlin's 'war censorship.'⁵ As a result, between 1,500 and 1,800 Russian journalists have fled.⁶

In its 2024 annual ranking of countries where journalists are actively stalked and repressed, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ranked Belarus at position 4 and Russia at position 5 out of the top 10 countries ranked for

imprisoning journalists.⁷ On December 1, 2024, CPJ also reported that 31 journalists were in prison in Belarus⁸ and 30 in Russia,⁹ and worldwide, 361 journalists were in jail.¹⁰

Despite these challenges, exiled journalists continue to investigate and report on critical issues happening inside their own countries. However, their work remains fraught with danger: there are threats to their safety and they often have to conceal their identities when reporting. In addition, due to the politics of their own countries, they encounter suspicion from host communities. Some have even been detained or imprisoned while in exile, further underscoring the precarious nature of their mission.¹¹

Exiled media communities have responded to production and distribution challenges by focusing on channels and platforms still accessible within their own countries. They also create and educate audiences on how to use VPNs¹² and adopt digital hygiene practices while covering specific topics otherwise restricted by state-funded channels. Even in exile, these media continue to be targeted and threatened.¹³ States take measures to limit the channels

² 'A lifetime sentence: children of the gulag fight to return from exile'; *The Guardian*, 2021: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/23/children-of-the-gulag-soviet-stalin>

³ 'The writers who defied Soviet censors'; *BBC*, 2017: <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20170724-the-writers-who-defied-soviet-censors>

⁴ 'Belarusian Journalists in Exile'; *RSF*: <https://www.reportrarutangranser.se/belarus-journalister-i-exil/the-journalists-of-belarus-in-exile/>

⁵ 'Russian journalism chained by the Kremlin's systemic censorship' *RSF*, 2022: <https://rsf.org/en/russian-journalism-chained-kremlin-s-systemic-censorship-0>

⁶ 'RSF urges European governments to strengthen their support for independent Russian journalism'; *RSF*, 2023: <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-urges-european-governments-strengthen-their-support-independent-russian-journalism-resilient>

⁷ *In record year, China, Israel, and Myanmar are world's leading jailers of journalists*, CPJ, 2024: <https://cpj.org/special-reports/in-record-year-china-israel-and-myanmar-are-worlds-leading-jailers-of-journalists/>

⁸ *The number of journalists imprisoned in Belarus from 2018 to 2024*: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/1280798/umfrage/inhaftierte-journalisten-in-belarus/>

⁹ *Number of imprisoned journalists worldwide by country in 2024*: <https://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/153606/umfrage/inhaftierte-journalisten-weltweit/>

¹⁰ *Journalist jailings near record high in 2024 as crackdown on press freedom grows*, CPJ, 2025: <https://cpj.org/2025/01/journalist-jailings-near-record-high-in-2024-as-crackdown-on-press-freedom-grows/>

¹¹ *The fate of Russian journalism in exile was discussed in Berlin*, DW, 2024 (in Russian): <https://www.dw.com/ru/v-berline-ob-sudili-sudbu-rossijskoj-zurnalistiki-v-izgnanii/a-70553642>

¹² *Help Russians and Belarusians Access the Truth*, Novaya Gazeta: <https://novayagazeta.eu/vpnovaya>

¹³ *Russia seeks to arrest, prosecute, fine, and restrict 13 exiled journalists*, CPJ, 2024: <https://cpj.org/2024/07/russia-seeks-to-arrest-prosecutes-fines-and-restricts-13-exiled-journalists/>

they use,¹⁴ and tech giants restrict channels for accessing information.¹⁵ Host countries are implementing strategies to reduce Russian-language content in the local media landscape.¹⁶ They are also increasing residency permit/visa restrictions that limit possibilities to work and often lead to social segregation and isolation.¹⁷

Securing funding is a major challenge for independent journalists and media operating from exile because their financial support depends heavily on grants. According to the 2022 JX Fund report “Sustaining Independence: Current State of Russian Media in Exile,” in 2023, 79 per cent of the funding for Russian independent media came from donor revenue, with the remainder relying on advertising, commercial revenue, and other sources.¹⁸

In 2022, DW Akademie launched the Space for Freedom¹⁹ program as part of the German government’s Hannah Arendt Initiative.²⁰ In collaboration with local partners — the Baltic Center for Media Excellence, the Sustainability

Foundation and the Belarus in Focus Information Office — the program supports journalists in continuing their vital work while in exile, and in ensuring they can secure their livelihoods. It also focuses on developing structures and creating resources that enable exiled journalists and media organizations to maintain critical reporting.

This paper, commissioned by DW Akademie, examines the current experiences, needs and aspirations of exiled media professionals within the framework of the Space for Freedom initiative. The report’s primary goal is to assess the conditions and challenges faced by exiled journalists from Russia and Belarus and to identify opportunities for targeted support.

The findings are based on data from the 64 respondents in the quantitative survey, and supplemented by 20 qualitative in-person interviews with exiled media professionals and newsroom representatives from Belarus and Russia.

14 ‘YouTube traffic in Russia drops to 20 percent of pre-throttling levels, platform ‘de facto blocked’ in the country’, Meduza, 2024: <https://meduza.io/en/news/2024/12/23/youtube-traffic-in-russia-drops-to-20-percent-of-pre-throttling-levels-platform-de-factoblocked-in-country>

15 ‘Apple removes nearly 60 additional VPNs from its Russian App Store’, Novaya Gazeta, 2024: <https://novayagazeta.eu/articles/2024/09/25/apple-removes-nearly-60-additional-vpns-from-its-russian-app-store-en-news>

16 ‘International media organizations are extremely concerned by the Latvian proposal to ban Russian-language content on PSM from 2026’, EBU, 2023: <https://www.ebu.ch/news/2023/10/international-media-organisations-extremely-concerned-by-latvian-proposal-to-ban-russian-language-content-on-psm-from-2026>

17 ‘Latvia extends visa restrictions for Russians until March 2024’, Latvian Public Media, 2023: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/economy/transport/27.06.2023-latvia-extends-visa-restrictions-for-russians-until-march-2024.a514534/>

18 ‘Current State of Russian Media in Exile’, JX Fund, 2023: https://jx-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Sustaining_Independence_Current_State_of_Russian_Media_in_Exile_2023.pdf?x76306

19 Space for freedom: Strengthening voices from exile, DW Akademie, 2023: <https://akademie.dw.com/en/space-for-freedom-strengthening-voices-from-exile/a-63573501>

20 New network to protect journalists around the world, DW Akademie, 2022: <https://akademie.dw.com/en/hannah-arendt-initiative-new-network-to-protect-journalists-around-the-world/a-63474841>

Demographics and stories of exile

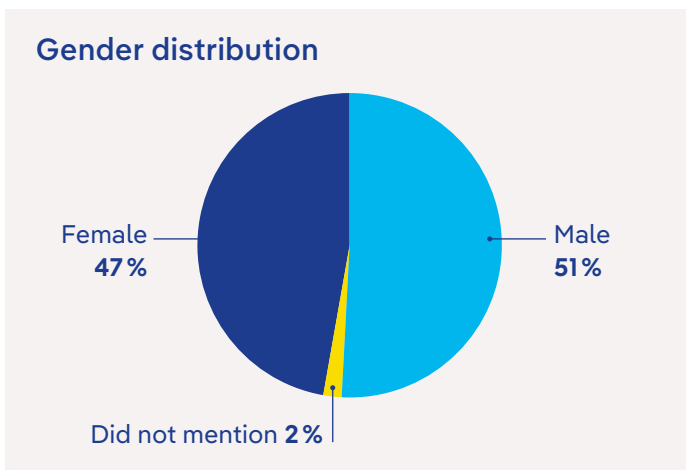
The demographic analysis of the survey respondents and interview participants provides an understanding of the diverse backgrounds, experiences and professional roles of journalists and media representatives in exile. The respondents' ages ranged from early 20s to late 50s. This highlights the various perspectives and experiences across the different age groups, from young journalists who have just finished their studies to experienced journalists who have long been in the field. Their age difference also implies relatively different experiences of relocating and being exposed to personal and professional setbacks. This will be looked at more closely later in the report.

Age breakdown

18–30: 15 percent
 31–45: 60 percent
 46–60: 25 percent

Gender distribution

Slightly more males than females responded to the survey.

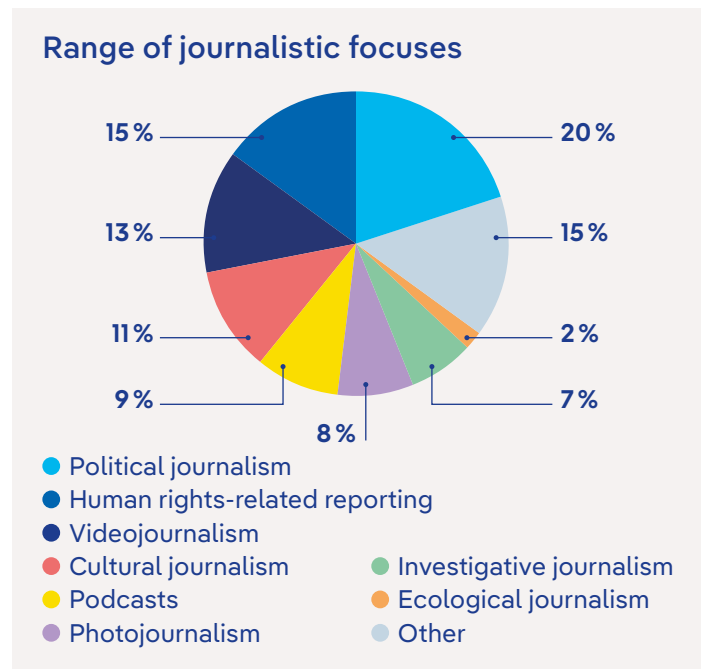


Country of origin

Of the respondents, 33.8 percent stated they were originally from Russia; 60 percent stated they were originally from Belarus.

Journalistic focuses

The respondents had various journalistic focuses. Approximately 20 percent covered the political scene while approximately 15 percent focused on human rights issues.



Of the 20 journalists and media representatives who took part in the in-person interviews, 10 were from Russia and 10 were from Belarus, and were primarily based in Latvia, Poland, Lithuania and Germany. Most respondents had chosen their country of exile based on its proximity to their country of origin.



At the beginning, we fled to Armenia as we thought the war would stop soon and we could return. However, by March 2022, we realized that the situation would not improve anytime soon, so we applied for a visa. Latvia was the only country willing to accept us at that time.

Female journalist from Russia
 Age group: 31–45

45 percent of the respondents fled from their country of origin between 2021–2022, while 26.4 percent fled in 2021; 18.9 percent fled in 2023, followed by 9.4 percent in 2024. These various years of relocation reflected the changing circumstances in both Russia and Belarus. For example, some interviewees from Belarus reported fleeing in 2022 after Russia had invaded Ukraine and it became clear that the situation would further deteriorate.

“

On July 3, 2021, we left for a holiday in Georgia. We only had one suitcase for all of us – my wife, our child and me. We even had return tickets to Belarus. Shortly after we arrived in Georgia, my parents' home was searched and my apartment was ransacked. It became clear that returning was not an option. At the age of 40, I realized I would have to start everything from scratch, with only one suitcase.

Male journalist from Belarus

Age group: 31–45

The initial destinations for most journalists were neighboring visa-free countries such as Georgia, Kazakhstan and Armenia. However, these locations were often temporary. All interview respondents mentioned that their final destinations, such as Latvia, Poland or Lithuania, were determined for practical considerations, including the proximity to their networks already in exile, and available support.

“

When the war started, my wife and I realized we could not stay any longer. It wasn't a decision, we just knew we could not stay anymore. We finished our remaining projects, knowing we wouldn't return for a long time. In October 2022, when mobilization was announced, we left. Initially, we arrived in Kazakhstan while waiting for a Schengen visa, and then we moved to Latvia.

Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 31–45

Many Belarusian respondents had not planned to flee but did so due to immediate threats. Eight out of the ten interviewees said they had been labelled as extremists and faced the imminent risk of detention. One journalist recounted fleeing the very day their editor-in-chief was arrested. Some felt their work would still have consequences for others even after the journalists had fled.

“

My son is currently serving a sentence because they claimed he insulted the president. He didn't. He was detained simply because I left.

Male journalist from Belarus

Age group: 46–60

Integration and sense of belonging

Integration, adaptation and a sense of security emerged as recurring themes among the interview and survey respondents, underscoring significant personal and professional challenges for journalists in exile. For those determined to settle in their current locations, integration was often part of their long-term plans. Journalists who had managed to collaborate with local media described this as a factor that has eased their adaptation to the new environment. However, both physical and digital security remained critical concerns, affecting 47 percent of the survey respondents, and creating barriers to integration.

“

As I work in a more or less local environment, I feel somewhat integrated as opposed to most of my colleagues, but in terms of security, the fear always remains. Especially last year, after the poisoning of Elena Kostyuchenko,²¹ I realized that you have a feeling as if you are far away in a safe European country but apparently, they have their ways of getting to you even here.

Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 31–45

This feeling of not being safe was echoed by another journalist:

“

The KGB visited my mother in Minsk and warned her that they even knew the address of where I was staying in Tbilisi. I started actively searching for a new location where I could feel safe.

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 18–30

She described the emotional effect it had on her:

“

I could not find safety in Georgia, so I moved to a shelter provided by a humanitarian NGO.²² In that shelter, I realized I was in a deep depression. I was ashamed of myself because back in Belarus, the KGB made me sign a paper claiming I would support them with information. I thought my colleagues and friends would never trust me again. I closed myself off and wouldn't go out or talk to anyone. Things improved slightly when I moved to Poland. Here, I feel more or less safe.

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 18–30

For those whose work has suffered most due to relocation, the integration process has been slower and often hindered by an inability to expand their professional networks in local language environments. In Latvia, the Russian-speaking journalists found it easier to navigate daily life given the significant Russian-speaking population. Conversely, in Poland, the language barrier posed a considerable obstacle.²³

²² The name of the NGO cannot be revealed due to security constraints

²³ 'Belarusian Exiled Media Since the 2020 Revolution'; JX Fund, 2024, p. 20: https://jx-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Silenced_but_Resilient_BY_Media_Independent_Media_in_Exile_Report_2024_vFinal.pdf?x68414=&utm_source=chatgpt.com

²¹ Exiled Russian journalist describes 'poisoning' ordeal on German train, Reuters, 2023: <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/exiled-russian-journalist-describes-poisoning-ordeal-german-train-2023-08-26>

Another journalist emphasized how relocation had disrupted his professional life:



Relocation has mostly affected me professionally. Before, I worked full-time as a video journalist for Radio Liberty. What type of integration can we talk about if I don't work anymore, and the only people I talk to are those who are also from Belarus?

Male journalist from Belarus

Age group: 45–55

For many exiled journalists, the uncertainty of their future residence loom large. The combination of language barriers and short-term visas often weakened their integration efforts.



At the beginning, it was very hard for me in the new place. I felt guilty in the locals' eyes for my country's actions. That was a huge setback from an integration point of view. Secondly, it was the language – if I knew I would be here for a long time, I would put more effort into learning it. But with the limited permit, I don't even know if I'm staying here for a long time, or perhaps not.

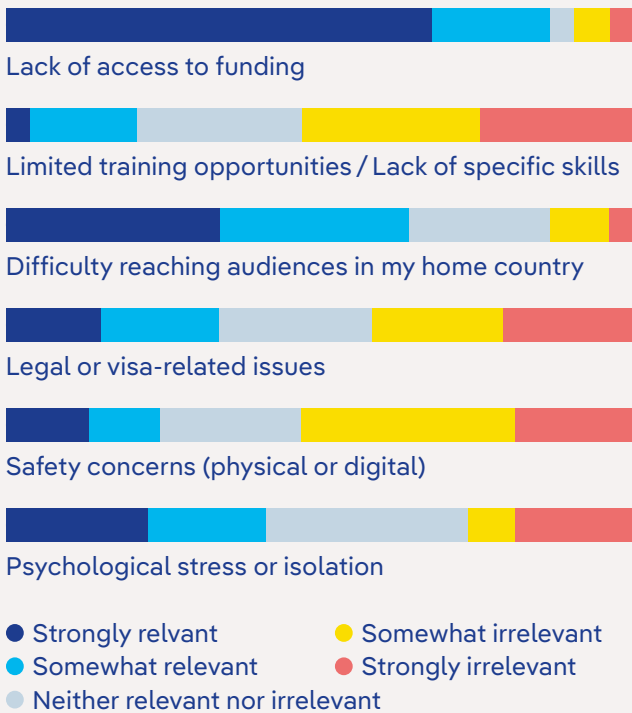
Female journalist from Russia

Age group: 25–31

Intense competition for limited grant funding

The issue of unsustainable financing remained a leading concern among surveyed journalists and media outlets in exile, with approximately 90.6 percent of respondents highlighting it as a primary challenge. Both survey and interview data underscored the financial burden as a recurring and significant obstacle; most exiled journalists and newsrooms rely heavily on grants from international organizations, foundations and donor programs.²⁴ However, the short-term nature of these grants severely undermine long-term planning and operational sustainability.

Challenges faced by individual journalists



“

The whole exile community is in a war for grants right now. There are so many of us, but the finances are insufficient to cover everyone.

Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 25 – 35

Similarly, for newsrooms, short-term financial cycles further exacerbate operational difficulties. Specifically, smaller and emerging newsrooms struggle to sustain activities.

“

It's very hard to sustain a newsroom without long-term planning. Short-term financial support makes it almost impossible, not to mention that most of our time is spent writing reports and dealing with paperwork.

Male editor-in-chief of a Belarusian newsroom

5 – 10 reporters

The challenges of platform restrictions also hinder financial stability. Several relocated newsrooms that relied on monetized YouTube content faced significant setbacks when YouTube was blocked in Russia during the winter of 2024.²⁵

“

Our YouTube channel's popularity was steadily growing, and we monetized most of our content through shorts. But one day, it all stopped. It was a huge challenge.

Female editor-in-chief of relocated media from Russia

More than 20 staff

²⁴ 'Current State of Russian Media in Exile', JX Fund, 2023, p 16: https://jx-fund.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Sustaining_Independence-Current_State_of_Russian_Media_in_Exile_2023.pdf?x76306

²⁵ YouTube Practically 'Blocked' In Russia, Expert Says, As Traffic Plummet, Radio Free Europe, 2024: <https://www.rferl.org/a/youtube-practically-blocked-in-russia-expert-says/33251568.html>

All newsrooms surveyed identified long-term financial support as an immediate and critical need.



Commercial income and crowdfunding only cover 10 percent of our costs. The rest is heavily reliant on grants. Without long-term funding, we cannot promise our reporters holidays, insurance or even stable employment next month. It's incredibly frustrating.

Male editor-in-chief of relocated Russian newsroom

More than 20 staff

Financial instability not only hampers operational efficiency but also creates additional challenges, such as the inability to provide permanent work contracts or employee benefits. This ultimately impacted staff retention and motivation.

Challenges of legalization and administrative systems

During the interviews, themes related to legalization, visa acquisition and taxation emerged as critical challenges for relocated journalists and media personnel. These issues significantly affect the personal and professional stability of those in exile. Given that 57 percent of survey respondents identified legalization as a persistent challenge, the impact of governmental restrictions and procedural obstacles on journalists' livelihoods cannot be overstated.

For many exiled journalists, the process of renewing passports and obtaining residency permits was fraught with uncertainty, often disrupting their work and integration efforts.

“

As a Belarusian citizen, I am deeply concerned about my passport's expiration. I think about it several times a day, it severely disrupts my work rhythm. The Latvian authorities refuse to recognize expired Belarusian passports, which means I might have to flee from Latvia as well.

Male journalist from Russia
Age group: 35–41

Another journalist highlighted the ongoing stress associated with short-term permits:

“

The main issue for me remains the residency permit, which is getting harder to acquire in Europe. With the recent visa restrictions in the Czech Republic and here in Latvia, we constantly discuss whether our visas will be extended or not. It's a huge pressure—I don't even try harder to integrate because I don't know if I'll be staying.

Male journalist from Russia
Age group: 25–35

These visa and legalization challenges extend beyond individuals and heavily affect relocated media outlets.

One respondent described the prolonged strain:

“

Over the past three years, our reporters' visa issues haven't been resolved. As a major outlet, we've approached the government with requests for temporary solutions, but nothing has changed. This creates enormous stress for our reporters.

Female editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian newsroom
More than 20 staff

In addition to legal hurdles, adapting to new taxation systems added another layer of complexity for both individual journalists and media organizations.

“

Most of us are freelancing now, which means we're responsible for handling our own taxes. I feel like I need a manual to navigate this system, I always worry that I've done something wrong.

Male journalist from Belarus
Age group: 46–60

The problem extends to media outlets, which often lack funding for administrative roles. One editor-in-chief from a relocated Russian newsroom with more than 20 staff said:

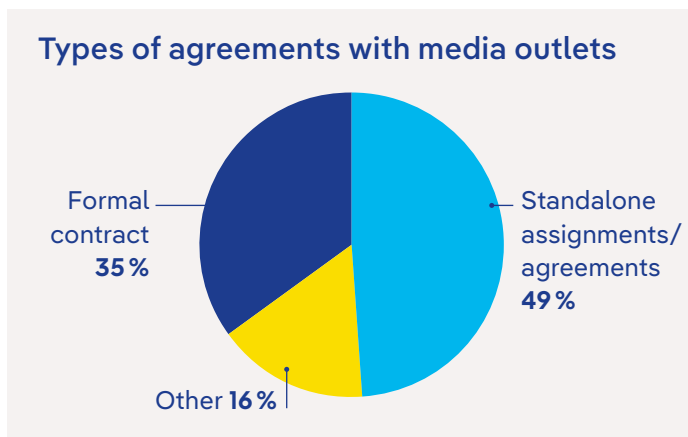
“

We can't afford to hire an accountant familiar with the local tax system. The grants we receive only cover project costs, not administrative expenses. As the editor-in-chief, I'm responsible for tax reports, and every time I submit them, I pray I haven't made a mistake that could lead to deportation for me or my team.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian newsroom
More than 20 staff

Navigating employment challenges in exile

The transition to exile has resulted in significant transformations for both individual journalists and media outlets from Belarus and Russia. Survey results revealed that 49 percent of responding independent journalists currently operated on a project-to-project basis while only 35 percent had affiliations with media organizations through freelance or service contracts. Issues related to visa acquisition extensively affected work arrangements. In some cases, even where journalists receive an opportunity to work on an employee contract, the visa limited their work and forced many to rely on ad hoc arrangements.



Photographers and videographers face issues that include oversaturation in the job market and reduced demand for localized content:

- Payrolls in the current country of residence are lower than in Belarus and significantly lower than in Russia.
- Most events covered come from the country of origin, and editorial offices mostly upcycle visuals provided by sources there. There are, therefore, fewer requests for content produced by videographers/photographers in exile.
- There are more relocated photographers/videographers and few available positions.
- Relocated newsrooms prefer to rehire their own staff and the local newsrooms prefer to work with locals due to the language barrier and different priorities.

“

We organized our current newsroom based on our own reporters who had relocated. We didn't hire experts for specific roles but instead assigned responsibilities to the experts we already had.

Female editor-in-chief of a relocated media outlet from Russia

More than 20 staff

Salaries can also be a problem.

“

I found a job as a cameraman in Kazakhstan, grabbed all my equipment I brought with me from Russia, and rushed to the venue. Only there did I discover the pay was even less than the cost of renting a tripod for half an hour. Even in Latvia, salaries are much lower than in Moscow; however, the prices are similarly high.

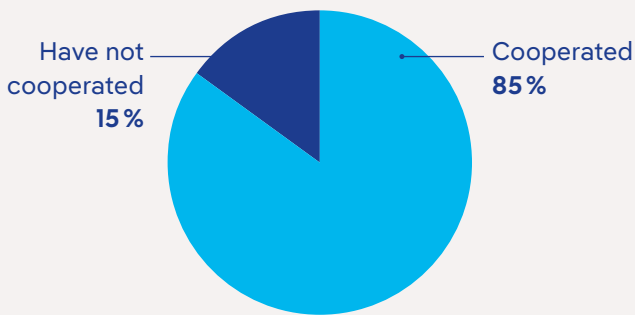
Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 45–55

Collaboration with relocated media

Cooperation with other relocated media remained the most accessible option for many journalists, with 85 percent of respondents reporting collaborations. Language, shared experiences and common editorial priorities facilitated these partnerships.

Independent journalists who have cooperated with relocated media outlets



Survey respondents as well as interviewees mentioned several difficulties, particularly the lack of funding for the media organizations themselves. In these cases, they prioritized their own reporters before considering collaboration with individual exiled journalists. While many described their experiences as largely positive, they often used terms like “unsustainable,” “intense competition,” and “very little funding.” Additionally, they noted the lack of permanent collaboration opportunities with relocated media outlets, which led to inconsistent and stressful experiences. However, they were also willing to continue collaborating if media organizations had sufficient financial resources.

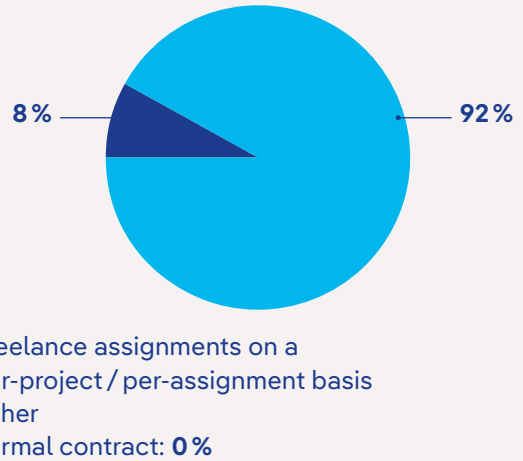
From the perspective of the exiled newsrooms themselves, 92 percent of the newsrooms contacted, regardless of their size or outreach, preferred to collaborate with relocated individual journalists on a one-time freelance basis, prioritizing in-house journalists.



There are a few individual authors in exile who contribute occasionally, but it's not a priority for us. We prefer to work with people who work here full-time.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Belarusian newsroom
More than 20 staff

Preferred agreement types of media outlets



Most newsrooms surveyed reported a positive experience when collaborating with individual journalists. They indicated that for specific topics requiring specialized knowledge, they often reached out to individual journalists in exile. However, interviews revealed significant concerns related to trust and security constraints which complicated collaborations. Doing background checks and surveillance for all new collaborations indicated a broader atmosphere of operational caution and sometimes led to relying solely on the capacity of their own in-house staff.

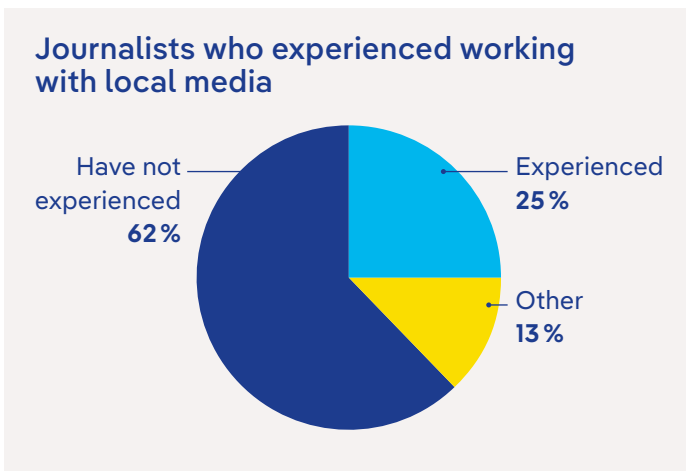


Another challenge with working with freelance journalists is security. We are considered ‘foreign agents,’ by the government in our own country and each time we collaborate with someone new, we must do a background check on them.

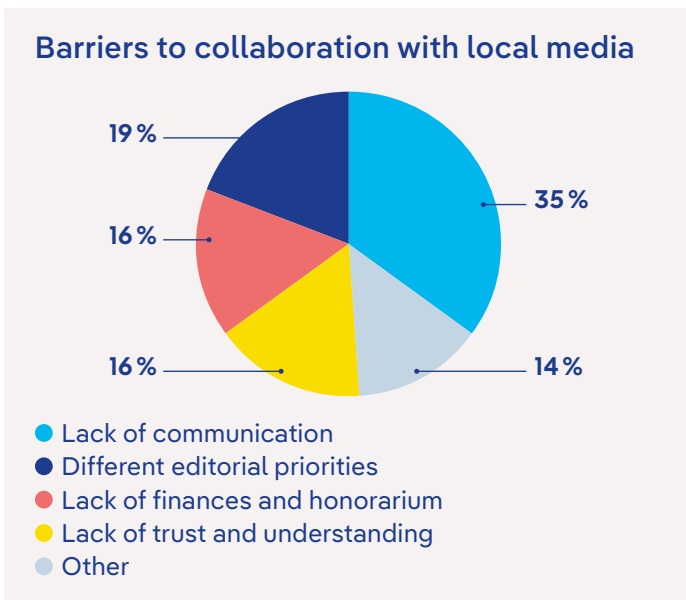
Male editor-in-chief of a relocated media outlet from Russia
More than 20 staff

Barriers to collaboration with local media

Collaborating with host-country media presents significant challenges. Only 25 percent of surveyed respondents had established connections with local media and cited language barriers, different editorial priorities and limited networking opportunities.



When collaborating, 35 percent mentioned a lack of communication and connection, while 19 percent cited different editorial priorities.



Most interview respondents noted that the salaries and honoraria paid by local newsrooms were significantly lower than what they would receive in Russia and Belarus.

Nevertheless, some interviewees from Russia mentioned collaborating with a small number of local media outlets in Latvia and Lithuania that offered Russian-language versions of their websites, and which created an opportunity for occasional cooperations. This was not always easy, stated one respondent.



I would highlight two issues regarding collaboration with local newsrooms: firstly, the language barrier; secondly, the work permit. This means that collaborations could be either partially official or through grants, or one must have a work permit.

Male journalist from Russia
Age group: 31–45

Barriers to operational efficiency in exiled newsrooms

Operational challenges within exiled newsrooms were one of the emerging themes revealed in both the survey responses and interviews. The challenges included a fragmentation of organizational structure and a lack of technological modernization.

A recurring issue raised by participants was the reliance on outdated workflows.



Many newsrooms are operating as if it's the 20th century.

Male journalist from Russia
Age group: 25–31

This sentiment highlights the inefficiencies in data handling and workflow management that persist across relocated newsrooms. These concerns were echoed in the survey findings, where 41 percent of respondents cited the lack of digital infrastructure and expertise as significant barriers.

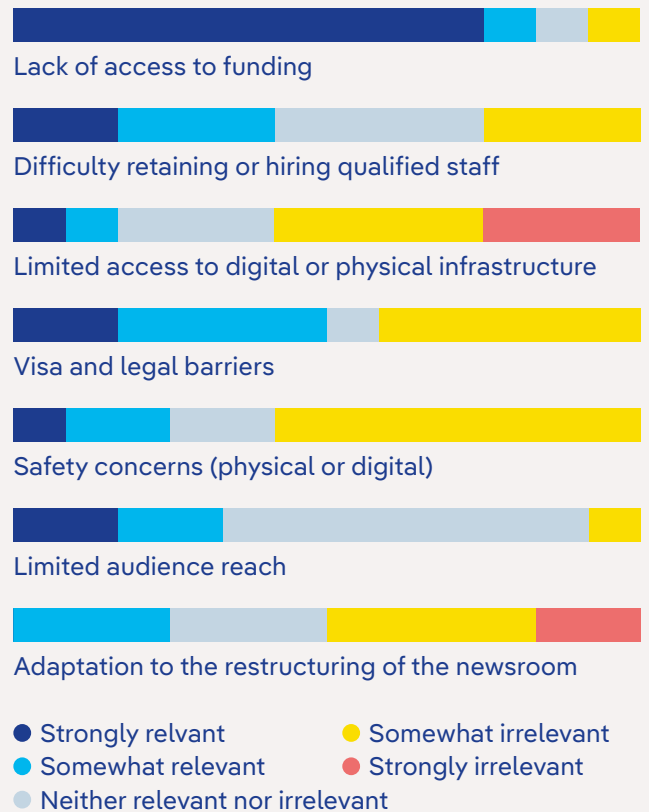
Small, relocated newsrooms are particularly affected by financial constraints, limiting their ability to invest in technological advancements and training. This was reinforced by 18 of the 20 interviewees who emphasized the importance of acquiring skills in areas such as artificial intelligence (AI), data visualization and data analysis for remaining competitive in international journalism markets.



This summer, I participated in an international media forum where I met journalists from other countries. Of course, their editorial priorities are different, and they don't face the same survival struggles as we do. But I realized how much we lag behind. Our newsroom is still far from the current global advancements.

Female journalist from Belarus
Age group: 31–45

Challenges indicated by media outlets



Financial instability exacerbate operational issues, forcing newsrooms to make difficult adjustments. For example, editors and media representatives described their post-relocation restructuring as a process of optimization. Financial cuts have led directly to staff reductions and structural transformations.



Our newsroom now operates entirely remotely. In 2024, we had to cut eight staff members because of reduced funding.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian newsroom
More than 20 staff

Shifting career paths

Career transition was a prominent issue throughout the interviews, highlighting how the instability faced by exiled journalists had forced many to reconsider their professional priorities. Stability often became the primary goal for journalists, with financial scarcity and limited job opportunities having led some to pursue more pragmatic professions outside of journalism.

“

I have a colleague who is now working in a factory for the sake of stability.

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 25–31

The editor-in-chief of a relocated newsroom from Belarus confirmed that several of their younger reporters had recently left journalism to take up factory jobs for financial stability.

Young journalists, particularly those who are recent graduates without extensive practical experience, struggle to establish themselves in an already overcrowded job market. The challenges of relocation exacerbate this, pushing many to pursue alternative professions. This shift not only affects individual journalists but also reduces their overall connection to the field and its editorial priorities.

“

The situation has changed for me over these years. Journalism is now like freelance work for me and even less than that. I have found a remote job in a university administration department, and that is now my stable job. This leads to a loss of connection with urgent topics. However, journalists must always follow the news and stay in the loop.

Female journalist from Russia

Age group: 31–36

Another recurring theme was the emotional toll facing journalists due to repression, financial instability and visa-related challenges. For many, mental strain played a role in their decision to leave journalism altogether.

“

My colleague spent months in the psychological support center and decided to quit journalism. I would probably do the same. We are all under tremendous stress. I just don't know what I would do instead.

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 35–41

This shift away from journalism has broader implications for the field. Seven out of the 10 Belarusian journalists and three out of the 10 Russian journalists interviewed indicated they had switched to non-journalistic professions.

Emotional tolls and loss of motivation

The emotional toll experienced by journalists in exile was a recurring theme in both the survey responses and interview transcripts. The challenges of displacement, professional uncertainty and personal loss converged to create a significant burden on their mental and emotional well-being.

Many journalists reported feeling a profound sense of instability after relocating, often without a clear understanding of what the future held. This sentiment was especially strong among those who were suddenly forced to leave their homes, often without any preparation.

In fact, 72 percent of survey respondents indicated that they were experiencing isolation and psychological stress (see the diagram “Challenges faced by individual journalists”), while 73 percent expressed a desire for psychological support.

An exiled journalist from Russia described the psychological difficulties.

“

In general, living in migration with the feeling that you'll return home any moment, and constantly waiting for that, is psychologically challenging. That's why I quickly switched my mindset to building a life here instead of longing for home.

Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 25–31

Various factors influence emotional stress in both individual and collective contexts inside newsrooms. Interview respondents described their psychological well-being using themes such as uncertainty about the future, issues of fragmented identity, a sense of security, financial burdens, isolation and burnout.

“

Uncertainty is killing me emotionally. The other day, we were discussing in our chat with other exiled journalists how funding is shrinking and becoming scarcer. What if international organizations stop supporting us? There will be some sort of ceasefire sooner or later. What if they tell us to go home without solving our passport and visa issues? My visa expires in April, and I don't even know if I'll receive an extension.

Male journalist from Russia

Age group: 35–41

Several journalists reported that being in exile had a direct impact on their families and intensified the journalists' emotional struggles. Family members left behind in their home countries were often targeted as a form of retaliation.

“

My mom told me the other day that she can now pay for her bus ticket with face ID. She said, 'Imagine, you just smile at the machine, and it deducts from your card.' You know what this means, right? It's so hard when your family is left behind, and you're here, not knowing where you belong anymore.

Female journalist from Russia

Age group: 35–41

Coping mechanisms in newsrooms

For the relocated newsrooms, coping mechanisms for stress and burnout varies based on the newsrooms' size, scale and financial capacity. Larger, well-established newsrooms tend to prioritize internal communication and maintaining reporter motivation.



We send out a weekly newsletter to keep our staff updated, as our reporters are scattered around the world. We organize retreats at least twice a year and rotate roles within the newsroom.

Female editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian media outlet

More than 20 staff

Joint psychological sessions organized for newsroom reporters have proven highly effective in coping with daily stress and anxiety. However, relatively new and smaller newsrooms often struggle to implement the same strategies and face significant challenges in maintaining reporter motivation.



Unfortunately, our budget does not allow us to invite our reporters from other countries. Moreover, some of our reporters have expired passports and have not found a solution yet, which means they might not be able to return if we organize a retreat for them.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Belarusian media outlet

5–10 staff

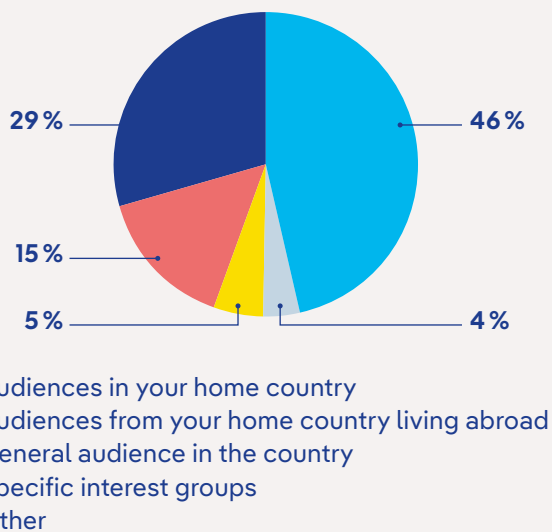
Nevertheless, psychological issues remained one of the biggest challenges for journalists in both countries due to existential concerns. They continued to deliver independent information while navigating labelling, censorship, financial difficulties, ongoing repression and detentions. Therefore, a priority in the survey and interview responses was any form of psychological assistance.

Challenges in maintaining audience engagement

Exiled journalists and media outlets face significant challenges in maintaining audience engagement, especially with audiences in their home countries. Responses from surveys and interviews highlighted common issues such as diminishing reach, censorship and changing audience habits.

Among the independent journalists surveyed, 46 percent identified their primary target audience as being in their home country, while 29 percent focused on Russian-speaking individuals living abroad.

Target audience of interview respondents



Survey respondents repeatedly identified several significant challenges that impeded efforts to reach their target audience. These challenges included:

- Blocking of YouTube in Russia
- Labels such as ‘extremist media’ and ‘foreign agents’ in Russia and Belarus
- Insufficient human resources for audience engagement
- Audience fatigue with the same topics and a disconnect between the contexts inside and outside the country
- Estrangement from the local audience
- Criminalization of the consumption of extremist content
- Lack of technical resources to create higher-quality content

Although the primary focus remains on targeting the audience within the country, 86.8 percent of survey respondents saw this as highly problematic due to several reasons.



This marathon has been ongoing for four or five years now. People are tired of negative news and are worn out by reports of who has been jailed this time.

Male journalist from Belarus

Age group: 45–51

Digital hygiene and informant connectivity

Given the criminalization of content consumption in Belarus,²⁶ several Belarusian interview respondents emphasized the importance of creating informative resources about digital hygiene. While practices like clearing browsing history and reading news on Telegram without reacting to or following certain channels have become routine, risks are still involved. People can inadvertently put themselves in danger by engaging with independent content from exile.



My mom has learned how to stay informed about what’s happening in the country while maintaining good digital hygiene. She is very careful on Telegram and knows how to use a VPN. But what about most people?

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 25–31

²⁶ In Belarus, people are detained even for likes, Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2024 (in Russian): <https://baj.media/ru/v-belarusi-zaderzhivayut-dazhe-za-layki-v-kakih-socsetyah-i-messendzherah-ih-ostavlyat-2>

A recurring issue highlighted by the majority of interview participants was the connection with contacts inside the country. This problem had led to both technical and creative challenges. Without these contacts, media organizations become disconnected from everyday issues within their country, and it's difficult to obtain materials and conduct interviews.

“

This situation will become increasingly difficult due to the growing volume of information that needs to be transmitted about daily practices. For instance, what's happening with laws, flight schedules and crime rates? We can monitor all of that. But what are people discussing while they bargain at the market? The only way to find out is to go to the market and listen, but that opportunity is not available to us.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian newsroom

More than 20 staff

Journalists and media outlets from Russia and Belarus were anticipating future challenges in reaching their audiences, particularly given the expectation that Gmail may be blocked in Russia.²⁷ This could hinder their ability to disseminate newsletters to subscribers and echo what had happened in 2022 when Google blocked mail.ru, preventing newsletters from reaching their intended recipients.

“

We've foreseen potential issues for 2025 and have already begun considering ways to address them. First, we're thinking about the possibility that Durov might cooperate with the authorities and block specific channels on Telegram, including ours, while allowing only state-funded channels. Alternatively, similar to the situation in Belarus, they might not block anything outright but instead criminalize access to certain content.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian media outlet

More than 20 staff

On the other hand, journalists from Belarus said it would be hard for their own government to block social media channels.

“

Russia can block YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and suggest something else as a substitute, Belarusian government does not have that financial capacity at the moment.

Male journalist from Belarus

Age group: 35–41

Nevertheless, a full analysis of the audiences' digital footprints is hard to achieve given the extensive use of VPN which significantly limits the amount of data that could be collected for audience research.

“

Imagine you're reading a story, and you have two anonymous experts and two anonymous characters and so on. But again, what are the options here?

Female editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian newsroom

More than 20 staff

²⁷ Russia's government services portal has asked people to stop using Gmail, Meduza, 2024: <https://meduza.io/en/cards/russia-s-government-services-portal-has-asked-people-to-stop-using-gmail-is-the-kremlin-planning-to-block-the-email-provider>



During some notable events, we detect significant peaks of audience reach on all our channels, events like Navalny's death,²⁸ or Prigozhin's rebellion,²⁹ things that the state media does not cover or covers it incorrectly.

Male editor-in-chief of a relocated Russian media outlet

More than 20 staff

Another aspect of maintaining audience engagement is that stories and material from within the country often rely on anonymous sources.³⁰ Relying on unnamed sources can lead to fragmented communication with the audience, as the lack of identifiable voices makes it harder for readers and viewers to connect with the narratives on a personal level. Additionally, anonymity can sometimes reduce the perceived credibility of the content, as audiences may struggle to fully trust or verify information that lacks clear attribution.



The question of which media you follow has become an intimate topic in Belarus. People might not even discuss it with their best friends or colleagues. However, I am probably one of the most recently relocated journalists you are speaking to, as I moved just a few months ago. People still read. I personally accessed content through a VPN back in Belarus.

Female journalist from Belarus

Age group: 25–31

²⁸ Alexei Navalny dies in Russian prison aged 47 — authorities, DW, 2024: <https://www.dw.com/en/alexei-navalny-dies-in-russian-prison-aged-47-authorities/a-68275055>

²⁹ Prigozhin's Rebellion, DW, 2023 (in Russian): <https://www.dw.com/ru/matez-prigozhina-i-cvk-vagner/t-66019802>

³⁰ A new ethics commission may be formed based on an ethics memorandum, The Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2024 (in Russian): <https://baj.media/ru/boris-goreckij-novuju-komissiju-po-je-tike-mogut-sformirovat-na-osnove-jeticheskogo-memoranduma/>

Assessment methodology

This report employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative research to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, experiences and needs of journalists in exile from Belarus and Russia. The research was conducted between November 2024 and January 2025 and integrated human-centered qualitative narratives with generalized quantitative survey data. The methodology comprised the following components:

1. Quantitative survey

To gather a foundational understanding of the landscape, a quantitative survey was distributed among freelance/independent journalists and representatives of media outlets (e.g. editors-in-chief, full-time reporters) operating in exile. The surveys were disseminated through internal channels and networks of local partners, such as the Baltic Center for Media Excellence, the Sustainability Foundation and the Belarus Press Club. The survey aimed to:

- Identify key operational and psychological challenges faced by journalists and media outlets in exile.
- Explore existing connections and collaborations among relocated newsrooms, individual journalists and local media.
- Assess the primary audience profiles of these media and their strategies for maintaining engagement.
- Gauge expectations and experiences with support programs like Space for Freedom.

Survey questions addressed topics such as access to financial, psychological and legal resources, technological and operational barriers in exile, existing and potential collaborations with local media and other exiled journalists, and feedback on the effectiveness of support programs and practical recommendations.

The survey findings provide a general understanding of these themes, informing the subsequent qualitative interviews.

2. Qualitative interviews

A total of 20 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual journalists and newsroom representatives operating from exile. Interview respondents were selected based on their consent provided through the survey responses, using a convenience sampling approach. This sampling method, while not fully representative, aligns with other studies on journalists in exile and helps to provide cross-validation against similar studies. These interviews explored:

- The decision-making processes and the emotional toll of relocation.
- Challenges faced during and after relocation, including integration into local communities.
- Changes in newsroom workflows and strategies for maintaining audience trust and engagement.
- Ethical challenges, especially when collaborating with anonymous contributors from within Belarus or Russia.
- Perceived impacts of existing support programs and expectations for future initiatives.

The interviews were conducted in person, allowing for a deeper exploration of the participants' narratives and contextual experiences. This human-centered qualitative approach enriched the quantitative data by capturing nuanced, narrative-driven insights.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the subject matter, rigorous ethical protocols were followed:

- All survey responses and interview data were anonymized to protect participants' identities.
- Interviews were recorded only with explicit consent, and participants were fully informed about how their data would be used.
- The study adheres to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), ensuring secure storage and handling of all data.

Limitations

While the methodology provided valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations:

Sampling representativeness

The sample reflects the perspectives of a subset of exiled journalists and media representatives who participated voluntarily. This is not fully representative of all journalists and media outlets in exile, especially given the lack of reliable data on the total number of those who have relocated from Belarus and Russia. It allows for identifying trends, common challenges and individual stories that represent key issues faced by journalists in exile. Additionally, responses and interviews are representative of different locations (e.g. Poland, Latvia) and demographics (e.g., age, gender, type of journalism). The participants included a mix of freelancers, newsroom staff and editors.

Convenience sampling

As with other studies on exiled populations, convenience sampling was used due to logistical constraints and the difficulty of accessing a randomized sample. However, efforts were made to cross-validate findings with similar studies to improve reliability.

Evolving context

The geopolitical situation and conditions for journalists in Belarus and Russia remain highly dynamic, potentially impacting the relevance and generalizability of the findings.

Despite these limitations, this study provides actionable insights into the needs and experiences of exiled journalists.

Analysis process

The analysis process for this assessment was conducted systematically using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software. All interviews were conducted in Russian, as was the subsequent analysis, including coding, to preserve the authenticity and nuances of the respondents' narratives. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns and significant themes across the data. This process involved coding the interview transcripts and survey responses, with codes being refined and grouped into broader categories as themes emerged.

Throughout the structured analysis, the survey responses and interviews were used to triangulate findings and ensure the validity of the identified themes. The themes included key topics describing challenges with integration, a sense of belonging, sustainable financing, fragmented workflows, accessing audience and more. A codebook was developed as a result of the coding process, which served as a guide for presenting findings in a coherent and evidence-based manner.

The use of the software helped maintain consistency and transparency throughout the analysis process.

Summary and reflections

The resilience and adaptability of exiled media cannot be overstated. Their commitment to uncovering the truth, despite considerable personal and professional sacrifices, highlights the importance of ongoing support and solidarity. At the same time, this assessment underscores the need for sustainable solutions to the challenges faced by exiled journalists, such as long-term financing, professional development, media management, monetization skills and more.

Fragmented editorial structures and priorities lead to disproportional task distribution among editorial personnel, which significantly impacts the operations of the newsroom.

Nevertheless, financial constraints and endless competition for grants and funding leave little space for administrative responsibilities. This leads to multiple task allocations for limited staff members, delayed payments, limited contractual modalities, emotional and psychological constraints and eventually hesitations to continue to work in the field or leave the profession entirely.

These concerns are exaggerated with the fear of the future of Russia and Belarus, conditions of people remaining there and journalists themselves who navigate through legislative and operational constraints. From this point of view, the role of organizations such as the Media Hub Riga, the Belarus Press Club and the Belarus Association of Journalists was highlighted throughout the interviews, and also in terms of its significance in providing common ground and a sense of belonging for journalists who share common issues.

A recurring theme throughout this assessment was the delicate balance between maintaining journalistic integrity and the practicalities of exile. While the anonymity of sources leads to major ethical issues, it also stems from a necessary compromise to ensure safety. Similarly, the pressure to engage audiences back home was weighed against the realities of censorship and blocked access.

Through a qualitative approach, this report reveals both the immediate and long-term needs of exiled journalists. It also explores ways through which programs can support the journalists and newsrooms through sustainable financing and technological advancements, and by building new networks and exploring collaborative models to continue playing a vital role in shaping the perception of reality both within and outside their home countries. In addition, the report explores ways to challenge authoritarian narratives and ensure access to truthful information.

Practical recommendations

The recommendations presented here stem from a detailed analysis of the survey responses and interviews conducted with exiled journalists and media representatives from Belarus and Russia. Participants were asked about the support they required to overcome the challenges they faced. The insights derived from this needs assessment provide a foundation for proposing interventions tailored to the current circumstances.

Outreach and financial stability for journalists

- Provision of paid project funding in collaboration with international media to ensure that the issues they cover gain international attention and engagement.
- Stable and long-term financing to enable newsrooms and journalists to plan beyond a three-month horizon and focus on strategic goals.
- Coverage of administrative costs in project budgets to strengthen organizational capacity, allowing editorial teams to focus on content creation.
- Provision of support with translation costs to enable investigative journalism pieces to reach international platforms and audiences.
- Support for collaborative publications with major media outlets worldwide, increasing the visibility of exiled journalists' work.
- Support for initiatives that shift the focus from survival to growth, helping exiled media to explore new markets and revenue streams, like media marketing, media business models, etc.

Professional development and training

- Provision of scholarships for journalists to attend international conferences or academic programs to broaden their skills and perspectives.
- Provision of internships with foreign media outlets for young journalists, exposing them to international standards, editorial structures, and broader topics.
- Provision of training courses on topics such as AI integration, data journalism, digital security and content visualization both for individual journalists and newsrooms.
- Specific support and guidance for media outlets in integrating AI and new technologies to remain competitive and resource-efficient.
- Support for language training scholarships (specifically in English) to help journalists expand their global reach and access to international audiences.

Networking and collaboration opportunities

- Support through building connections with various exiled journalists and media communities from beyond Russia and Belarus, including those from Afghanistan, Iran, Latin America and elsewhere; the fostering of solidarity and knowledge sharing.
- Institutionalization of knowledge sharing between media organizations and journalists in exile and international partners; fostering joint investigative projects and sharing best practices.
- Continuation of mentorship programs to connect experienced journalists with younger professionals and provide guidance on working effectively as a journalist in exile.



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