

Long-Term Effects of Political Persecution and Migration: A Case-Control Study of Belarusian Refugees and Migrants.

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Due to ongoing political persecution, the names and affiliations of some authors have been withheld for safety reasons.

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Introduction.

Following the presidential election on August 9, 2020, Belarus experienced significant political unrest. The official results declared President Alexander Lukashenko, in power since 1994, as the winner. However, widespread allegations of electoral fraud led to mass protests across the country¹. In response to the largely peaceful demonstrations, Belarusian authorities initiated a severe crackdown. Security forces employed excessive force, including beatings and detentions, against protesters. Reports indicate that between August 9 and 13, approximately 7,000 individuals were arrested, with many subjected to torture and inhumane conditions while in custody². Despite global criticism, the government continued its repressive measures, leading to a prolonged human rights crisis in the country. Following the contested presidential election in Belarus on August 9, 2020, and the subsequent governmental crackdown on dissent, a significant number of Belarusians have fled the country to escape political persecution and the threat of arrest. Estimates vary, but reports indicate that between 200,000 and 600,000 individuals have left Belarus since 2020. For instance, Hienadz Korszunau, former head of the Institute of Sociology at the Academy of Sciences of Belarus, noted that approximately 600,000 people emigrated due to intensified repression following the disputed elections³. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human rights situation in Belarus reported that "hundreds of thousands" had left the country in the two years following the election, many fleeing persecution⁴.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/belarus-unprecedented-crackdown>

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/09/15/belarus-systematic-beatings-torture-protesters>

³ <https://www.tvp.pl/tvp-world/kategorie/society/over-half-a-million-people-have-fled-belarus-since-2020-says-sociologist/77437550>

⁴ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/belarus-crackdown-rights-forcing-citizens-flee-says-un-expert>

The mental and physical health challenges faced by refugees are well-documented, with numerous studies highlighting elevated risks of conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and anxiety among these populations⁵. However, existing research predominantly focuses on refugees from regions like Southeast Asia and Africa^{6,7}, leaving a significant gap in understanding the experiences of political asylum seekers from Eastern Europe, particularly Belarus. Belarusian political refugees often endure specific forms of persecution, including incarceration, torture, and psychological abuse, which can lead to complex trauma responses. We understand and value the importance of involving persons with lived experience in research. One of our research team members has direct experience of imprisonment and endured mistreatment. His insights are crucial in ensuring that research remains informed by people lived experience. Understanding the unique experiences of Belarusian political asylum seekers is crucial for developing effective, culturally sensitive mental health services that address their specific needs. This study will address a critical research gap by focusing on political refugees from Eastern Europe.

Purpose and Objectives

1. Compare mental health conditions (e.g., PTSD, depression, anxiety) and somatic health between political refugees and migrants with no experience of criminal persecution on political grounds from Belarus.
2. Assess the quality of adaptation (social, work, and family domains) and overall quality of life in these groups.
3. Perform an in-depth analysis of PTSD characteristics and difficulties faced by political refugees using qualitative methods (e.g., focus groups).

Hypothesis of the research

Individuals with experience of politically motivated imprisonment are more likely to develop PTSD and other mental health disorders, which are hypothesized to manifest in a more severe form.

Study Design

Type: case-control study with both quantitative and qualitative components

Group A: Individuals who fled Belarus due to political persecution (e.g., former political prisoners, activists, or protesters). Must have experienced incarceration or documented political repression.

Group B: Migrants with no experience of criminal persecution on political grounds from Belarus (e.g., seeking employment or better living conditions).

The involvement of the team's member with direct experience of imprisonment will be crucial in helping us strengthen our qualitative interview methodology to be able to gather the most important

⁵ <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-080921-080359>

⁶ <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/2/806>

⁷ <https://www.thieme-connect.de/products/ejournals/abstract/10.1055/s-0038-1649337>

aspects of refugee trauma because of their personal experience regarding a politically motivated prison sentence.

Inclusion Criteria (Both Groups):

- Aged 18 and older.
- Residing outside Belarus from 6 months to 5 years.
- Willing and able to provide informed consent.
- Adequate literacy in the survey language (Russian or Belarus).

Exclusion Criteria (Both Groups):

- Severe cognitive impairment or active psychosis preventing participation.
- Incomplete documentation of migration motives or unclear categorization.

Study schedule:

November-December 2024 - Development of methodology and control questionnaire

December 2024 - February 2025 - Implementation of surveys

March - April 2025 - Analysis of results

April - May 2025 - Presentation of results

Sample Size

To calculate the minimum number of participants for a moderate effect size in a study comparing two independent groups, we use the following formula for sample size calculation based on a two-tailed *t*-test.

Samples was calculated based on “Stevenson M, Nunes T, Heuer C, Marshall J, Sanchez J, Thornton R, Reiczigel J, Robison-Cox J, Sebastiani P, Solymos P, Yoshida K, Firestone S. (2015) epiR: An R package for the analysis of epidemiological data. R package version 0.9-69”⁸.

Parameters for calculating:

exposure amongst controls: 50%; Odds ratio = 4; Matched controls per case = 1;

Alpha = 5%; Power = 80%; Correlation = 0,2.

These parameters reflect moderate effects in trauma and refugee mental health research.

Total N = 92 (gropes by 46). For practical reasons, are targeting at least 100 participants per group. This sample size ensures adequate power for subgroup analyses and robustness against attrition.

Our team member's with lived experience involvement will be crucial in helping us strengthen our qualitative interview methodology to be able to gather the most important aspects of refugee trauma with accuracy and sensitivity because of their personal experience regarding being in Belarusian penal system.

Data Collection

All data will be collected using a custom-built online survey tool hosted on a secure website. Participants will be provided with a unique link to the survey via email, social media groups, Telegram, Signal or direct communication through collaborating organizations (e.g., NGOs and

⁸ <https://shiny.vet.unimelb.edu.au/epi/sample.size.mccs/>

Belarusian diaspora groups). The survey tool will include both the quantitative questionnaires (e.g., IES-R, BDI-II, SCL-90-R, WHOQOL-BREF) and the detention conditions checklist for participants who experienced incarceration.

Prior to accessing the survey, participants will be required to read and digitally sign an informed consent form, outlining: The purpose of the study; Their right to withdraw at any time; Confidentiality of their responses; Contact details for mental health support, in case participation evokes distress.

The survey will be divided into sections, with clear instructions at the start of each section. Participants can save their progress and return later if needed.

The online tool will implement validation checks to ensure completeness (requiring all Likert scale questions to be answered). Optional questions (and open-ended qualitative items) will be clearly marked as such. This tool will include skip-logic features to ensure the detention conditions checklist is only shown to participants in Group A.

All collected data will be stored on a dedicated server, managed internally by the research team. The server will be protected by encryption (e.g., AES-256) and other cybersecurity measures, such as firewalls and anti-malware systems. Recorded interviews and focus group sessions will be stored in encrypted audio file formats on the research team's secure server. Only the IT specialist responsible for server management and the Principal Investigator (PI) (head of research) will have access to the raw data files. The IT specialist will ensure the technical security of the data, while the PI will oversee its ethical use. De-identified datasets will be provided to other members of the research team for analysis, with participant identifiers removed to ensure confidentiality.

Regular backups will be conducted weekly and stored in a separate secure location to protect against data loss. Backup files will also be encrypted and accessible only to the IT specialist.

The data collection and storage process will comply with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation) and other relevant international data protection laws.

All data will be retained for 5 years after the study's conclusion to allow for additional analyses and publication. After this period, all raw data will be permanently deleted following secure data destruction protocols.

Quantitative Data.

To compare the prevalence and severity of PTSD, depression, anxiety, and other mental health conditions between political refugees and economic migrants we use: IES-R, BDI-II, BAI, SCL-90-R, DES.

To assess the quality of adaptation (social, work, family) and quality of life in both groups we use: SASS, WHOQOL-BREF.

We plan to use PHQ-15 to compare the groups' self-reported somatic health and psychosomatic symptoms.

All these tools have a Russian version, and we use a professional translator to translate it in Belarusian language. Translations will be independently reviewed by bilingual psychologists to ensure cultural and linguistic accuracy. We believe it does not require special adaptation because of the close linguistic group of both languages and because we do not have resources to make this adaptation.

Summary of Questionnaires:

Domain	Questionnaire	Time to Complete
Trauma Exposure	Stressful Life Events Screening Questionnaire (SLESQ)	5 minutes
PTSD	PTSD Checklist for DSM-5 (PCL-5)	10 minutes
Depression	Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9)	3 minutes
Anxiety	Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7)	2 minutes
Perceived Stress	Perceived Stress Scale (PSS)	5 minutes
Somatic Symptoms	Patient Health Questionnaire-15 (PHQ-15)	3 minutes
Quality of Life	WHOQOL-BREF	10–15 minutes

For group A (political refugees) we add a special questionnaire that helps us capture their unique experiences, explain variations in PTSD and other MH outcomes within the group and provide actionable insights for rehabilitation recommendations. This questionnaire in application 1.

Qualitative Data

A subsample of 10-16 participants will be selected from Group A (political refugees) based on their willingness to share detailed accounts of their experiences and their diversity in demographic and detention-related characteristics. Participants will be invited to take part in semi-structured interviews or focus groups conducted either: a) In-person in a private, secure setting (e.g., research office or neutral community space); b) Online using encrypted video conferencing platforms (e.g., Zoom, MS Teams) for participants unable to attend in person.

Semi-structured interview guides will include open-ended questions exploring: experiences of incarceration and detention (e.g., physical and psychological abuse), post-detention challenges (e.g., adaptation, coping mechanisms), perceived impact on mental and physical health. Focus groups will explore shared challenges and perceptions among participants. Questions for interview will be prepared later, before re

Each interview or focus group session will last 60–90 minutes and will be recorded with participants' consent.

Interviewers will be trained in trauma-informed techniques to minimize distress during interviews. Participants will be informed that they may pause or terminate the interview at any time.

Verbal and written consent will be obtained before the sessions.

Audio recordings will be transcribed manually.

Support for Participants. All participants will be provided with a list of mental health resources and crisis helplines before the survey or interview begins.

Recruitment Process

Sources: Dissidentby beneficiaries (former political prisoners and their relatives), refugee support organizations, Belarusian diaspora communities, and NGOs assisting migrants. Method: Online advertisements (e.g., social media groups); direct outreach via friendly social media or community networks.

Screening for Eligibility: we will use a short pre-screening questionnaire to confirm migration motive (political vs. migrants with no experience of criminal persecution). It will include questions on migration motive, duration of stay outside Belarus, and ability to consent.

Data Analysis

Quantitative: we plan to compare PTSD prevalence, mental health scores, adaptation metrics, and quality of life between groups using t-tests (or Brunner-Munzel test for variables will be no normal) and chi-square tests, statistical difference will understand as significant when $p < 0,05$. Planned software, Jamovi desktop 2.6⁹.

Qualitative: we plan to use Quirkos¹⁰ for thematic analysis of interviews. Thematic coding will be conducted by at least two researchers to ensure reliability. Key themes will be illustrated with anonymized quotes to preserve participants' voices.

Qualitative insights will be used to contextualize findings from the quantitative part of the study (e.g., linking specific detention stressors to PTSD symptoms).

Ethical consideration

We will submit the protocol to the ethics committee of a collaborating university or NGO in Poland or Lithuania with expertise in refugee research.

The Principal Investigator (PI) will oversee the informed consent process to ensure compliance with ethical standards. Trained research assistants, fluent in the participants' language (Russian, Belarusian), will conduct the consent process.

All individuals involved in obtaining consent will receive training in trauma-informed communication to ensure sensitivity when discussing potentially distressing topics. They will also be trained to recognize signs of discomfort or hesitation from participants.

Participants will be provided with a detailed informed consent document outlining: the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without repercussions. Participants will sign the document electronically (via the online survey platform), depending on the mode of data collection.

If interviews or focus groups are conducted online, the consent process will be video- or audio-recorded before the session begins, with participants' explicit agreement.

The research team members will introduce themselves and explain the study's purpose and procedures in detail. The participant will be informed about the voluntary nature of participation and their ability to withdraw at any time. Participants will be guided through the consent document step-by-step to ensure comprehension. Time will be allocated for participants to ask questions or request clarifications. Before obtaining consent, participants will be asked to confirm their understanding of the study, including its risks and benefits. Additionally, the lived experience of one of our team members will contribute to the evaluation of ethical considerations in data collection, ensuring that all questions are framed sensitively to minimize distress among participants and take potential triggers into account.

Potential Risks to Participants

⁹ <https://jamovi.org/download.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.quirkos.com/index.html>

Discussing traumatic experiences, including incarceration, abuse, or adaptation challenges, may evoke strong emotional reactions, such as anxiety, sadness, or distress. Completing questionnaires on PTSD, depression, and other mental health conditions may remind participants of their trauma. S's trauma survivor perspective will contribute to formulating these.

There is a small risk of stigma or unintended disclosure if someone identifies a participant as taking part in the study, particularly in tight-knit communities or refugee networks.

Unauthorized access to participants' data could lead to privacy violations. Identifiable data about traumatic experiences or personal circumstances could cause harm if improperly disclosed.

Risk Management and Mitigation Measures. Recruitment materials will be designed to avoid identifying participants as political refugees to minimize social or legal risks. All researchers and interviewers will be trained in trauma-informed practices, ensuring they interact with participants respectfully and sensitively. Emphasize that participation is entirely voluntary, and participants can skip any question or withdraw at any time without any consequences. During interviews, participants will be encouraged to take breaks if they feel overwhelmed. Provide a list of local mental health resources, including crisis hotlines, therapists, and support organizations, at the end of the study or upon request.

Safety and anonymization of data described in the data collection part.

Recruitment methods will ensure anonymity in outreach, such as using private messages instead of public announcements in social media groups. Group interviews or focus groups will only involve participants who explicitly consent to discuss sensitive topics in a group setting.

There is no plan to involve patients/participants and public in designing or any phase of the study.

Reporting and dissemination

To promote transparency and collaboration, we will share the finalized research protocol on ResearchGate, an academic platform widely used by researchers. By publishing the protocol on ResearchGate, we aim to engage with the broader scientific community to solicit constructive feedback and suggestions for improvement. Ensure that our study adheres to open science principles by publicly sharing our methodology.

In addition to publishing the protocol on ResearchGate, we will seek personal feedback from researchers and experts with relevant experience in refugee health and trauma research, political persecution and its psychological consequences, and experts in case-control study design and methodology.

Feedback will also be incorporated into the finalized protocol and shared again.

Time for receiving feedback: 2 weeks.

Once the study is completed, we plan to: publish the findings in peer-reviewed journals specializing in trauma psychology, migration studies, and global health. Also, we plan to present the results at academic conferences to share insights with scholars, practitioners, and policymakers. We will share a plain-language summary with refugee support organizations and NGOs to ensure the findings are accessible to those who work directly with affected populations.

Data sharing plan

To promote transparency and reproducibility in research and allow other researchers to use the data for secondary analyses, meta-analyses, or validation studies, the quantitative data collected in this study will be compiled into a database compatible with Jamovi, an open-source statistical software. The finalized database will be published and made accessible on the Open Science Framework (OSF) platform¹¹. All shared quantitative data will be disidentified to protect participant privacy. The data will be shared under a Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC-BY), allowing users to freely access and utilize the data while giving proper credit to the original research team.

Due to the sensitive nature of qualitative data (e.g., narratives about incarceration, trauma, and abuse), the data will not be made publicly available. Researchers interested in accessing the qualitative data will be required to submit a formal request to the research team, explaining the purpose of their analysis; ethical considerations and data usage plans, must provide an institutional ethics approval certificate and a clear plan for using the data ethically and responsibly. Approved researchers will be provided access to the data under a data-sharing agreement, outlining conditions for usage, data storage, and publication of findings.

¹¹ <https://osf.io>

Annex 1.

RUS:  **Анкета**

Annex 2.

EASY-READ versions:

ENGLISH  **Easy-Read Protocol ENG**

BELARUSIAN  **Easy-Read БЕЛ**

RUSSIAN  **Easy-Read РУС**