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**POLICY PAPER**

# **EXILED AND AT RISK**

**Russian and Belarusian  
dissidents in non-EU States**


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# Content

<b>1. Executive Summary</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2. Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Key Findings</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>4. Extradition requests</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>5. Use of formal legal mechanisms to target dissidents</b>	<b>13</b>
5.1. Cancellation of residence permits and orders to leave the country	<b>13</b>
5.2. Arbitrary entry refusals	<b>14</b>
<b>6. Illegal actions</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>7. Conclusion and Recommendations</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>About the Author</b>	<b>25</b>

# 1. Executive Summary

This research provides a comprehensive overview of transnational repression and politically motivated persecution of dissidents from Russia and Belarus in the countries of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans.

None of the countries in these regions can be considered fully safe for free voices. The methods used, both legal and extralegal, to pressure activists, journalists, and human rights defenders vary significantly in these countries. The methods include, among others, detention based on bilateral extradition requests, imprisonment pending extradition proceedings, deportations under fabricated pretexts, entry bans, revocation or denial of residence permits for activists, as well as cases of kidnapping and forced transfer to Russia.

This policy paper examines a wide spectrum of individuals affected by such pressure, ranging from those with so-called active criminal cases in their home countries to those without any documented charges who nonetheless attract the interest of security services due to their civic engagement or refusal to serve in the military during Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Russia is a party to 96 bilateral agreements and a member of 20 international treaties on extradition. Since Febru-

ary 2022, the way extradition requests are handled has changed significantly. Having an agreement does not mean that a country will automatically respond to an extradition request. Depending on the strength of their legal systems, commitment to human rights, and political factors, countries may choose to cooperate or not in politically motivated cases involving Russian and Belarusian citizens.

The identification and work on such cases by human rights organizations is further complicated by the fact that Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and several other CIS countries use general criminal articles that exist in the criminal legislation of other states, such as "vandalism," "terrorism," and "extremism," to pursue politically motivated cases. In Belarus, it is common to initiate criminal cases on economic charges against political opponents. In such cases, the political motivation of the cases is not immediately apparent and may lead to the execution of extradition or detention without scrutiny.

The paper recommends that a better understanding of how these countries cooperate with the Russian and Belarusian repressive regimes will shed more light on the extent of Kremlin influence in the region, and also underline the importance of support programs for dissidents, such as humanitarian visas, temporary travel documents, human-

## 1. Executive Summary

itarian residence permits, and access to asylum procedures. Furthermore, in the context of ongoing discussions about establishing deportation hubs for individuals not entitled to remain in

the European Union, it is essential to offer an objective analysis of how non-EU countries apply pressure on exiled individuals from other states.

## 2. Introduction

Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, many civil society organizations and individual activists in Russia have been subjected to repression of different forms. Since 2022, more than 20,000 people have been detained for anti-war statements and peaceful protests. There have been 749 documented cases of extrajudicial persecution, including threats, dismissals from employment, physical attacks, expulsions from universities, and revocation of legal licenses. At least 1,200 individuals have become defendants in criminal cases related to anti-war actions (*OVD-Info, 2025*).

Repressive legislation continues to expand, labelling individuals as "foreign agents," organizations as "undesirable," and political and civil society groups as "extremist." This framework is compounded by new criminal charges that could be classified as "wartime censorship" laws. These include, among others, provisions on "discrediting the Russian Armed Forces," "spreading false information about the Armed Forces," and "calls for sanctions" (*Human Rights Watch, 2024*). Since the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and throughout the period that followed, around 900,000 people have left the country (*Krawatzek & Sasse, 2023*). Among these people are activists, journalists, human rights defenders, politicians, bloggers, artists, and others who publicly condemned the war

against Ukraine. Russian citizens are subject to visa regimes with most safe and democratic countries, including EU member states, the UK, the US, Japan, Australia, and other destinations. Obtaining a visa outside one's country of citizenship or legal residence is nearly impossible, and returning to Russia to apply for documents poses significant risks, even when individuals meet the eligibility criteria.

Moreover, Russian citizens have two types of identity documents: the so-called internal passport and the international (foreign travel) passport. Only around 30% of Russians possess the latter, while 70% do not (*Strelnikov, 2024*). This means the majority cannot cross international borders, apply for visas or residence permits in European countries, or even reach safe countries to request asylum, and airlines will not let them board. In addition, passports are often confiscated during searches of activists' homes. Many Russian emigrants remain in visa-free countries such as Georgia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Serbia, Montenegro, and others due to the difficulty of relocating to the European Union. These countries were chosen because the mass migration that began in 2022 and continues in 2025 has been concentrated in the above-mentioned countries. People leaving Russia and Belarus due to the threat of political persecution often select them as their first point of entry

## 2. Introduction

because of visa-free access and more flexible migration rules. Dissidents frequently spend long periods in these countries while waiting for a travel document from a safe state. In some cases, this stay may last for years. The Ark (Kovcheg) project, along with other human rights organizations, focuses on assisting dissidents in these visa-free countries, where the risk of transnational repression is much higher than in democracies that respect human rights. These countries are considered to be the most common places of residence for Russian and Belarusian citizens, as well as the primary destinations for mass emigration from these countries since 2022.

This policy paper examines how countries in the Black Sea region, the South Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Asia interact with Russian law enforcement authorities, either bilaterally or multilaterally, to persecute individuals facing politically motivated criminal charges. These charges often relate to anti-war views and actions, speech, participation in peaceful assemblies, freedom of association, or other forms of civic engagement. The paper also includes cases of Russian nationals who refused to serve in the military or chose to desert after being deployed, often from abroad, in protest against Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. These individuals, many of whom view participation in the war as a violation of internation-

al law and human rights, have been charged under Russia's criminal code for offences related to evading military service or desertion. In some cases, Russian authorities have attempted to locate, detain, or extradite such individuals through international channels or bilateral pressure. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Belarus's 2020 election crackdown, both regimes intensified efforts to silence critics abroad. Today, exiled journalists, opposition activists, and LGBTQ+ individuals face legal pressure, such as spurious extradition requests, extralegal threats, including surveillance, intimidation, and even kidnapping. Authoritarian security services have grown more aggressive and coordinated, and they try to reach out to dissidents abroad.

In addition to the introduction and the Executive Summary, this paper is structured into five sections. Section 3 outlines the key findings of the study. Section 4 examines the nature and methods through which extradition is instrumentalized to suppress dissent. Sections 5 and 6 analyze the legal and extralegal mechanisms applied against individuals from Russia and Belarus beyond their national borders. The final section concludes with targeted, practical recommendations aimed at strengthening the protection of dissidents and human rights defenders, and at mitigating the risks posed by foreign influence in host countries.

## 3. Key Findings

Autocratic regimes in Russia and Belarus use every tool available to repress dissent: legal manipulation, bilateral agreements, and outright violence to reach dissidents overseas. In some host countries, denial of entry has become a tactic to bar opposition Russians from re-entering (as seen in cases on the Georgian border). Elsewhere, authorities have revoked temporary residence statuses with little explanation, effectively stranding political exiles. Digital harassment and surveillance are on the rise, too, blurring the line between physical and online threats.

The level and nature of threats faced by exiled dissidents vary significantly across the examined regions. In parts of Central Asia, close cooperation with Moscow and Minsk has led to a sharp increase in politically motivated detentions and forced returns. In particular, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have detained Russian anti-war activists based on CIS extradition mechanisms and, in several instances, transferred them to Russian custody without any legal proceedings, demonstrating the use of violent and extrajudicial methods.

In the South Caucasus, Armenia continues to respond to Russian and Belarusian extradition requests under the CIS framework, leading to numerous detentions and travel bans. However, authorities have not taken active steps to carry out extraditions, and some

individuals were eventually able to leave the country with humanitarian support. By contrast, the situation in Georgia has deteriorated rapidly since 2024. There has been a surge in arbitrary and undocumented refusals of entry for dissidents, as well as deportations without due process, raising serious concerns about the rule of law and political alignment with Russia.

In the Western Balkans, pressure on dissidents tends to take more administrative forms. In Serbia, Russian activists have faced cancellations of residence permits and orders to leave the country, typically justified on vague “national security” grounds. However, no cases of enforced returns or direct threats to these individuals have been recorded. Montenegro and other neighboring countries have generally refrained from acting on extradition requests, especially in cases that raise concerns about political motivation.

In Turkey, some dissidents have faced administrative obstacles such as entry bans or residence issues. The situation changed in September 2025. The Ark (Kovcheg) documented the first case of bilateral cooperation between the Russian and Turkish Interpol bureaus, bypassing the central office. A Russian dissident was detained shortly after contacting the Russian consulate, and Turkey issued a deportation order on national security grounds. The analyzed



### 3. Key Findings

case materials indicate that the decision was based on information provided by the Russian Interpol bureau, linking the individual's anti-war comments on social media to 'extremism'-related charges (Article 205.2 of the Russian Criminal Code). According to Amnesty International (*Amnesty International, 2023*) and OVD-Info (*OVD-Info, 2024*), this provision is systematically misused in Russia. At least 114 criminal cases were initiated in 2024 alone, 70 of them for anti-war comments. This case marks a precedent, suggesting that Turkey can no longer be regarded as a safe environment for Russian and Belarusian dissidents.

European countries provide support to dissidents through humanitarian visas. From 2022 to mid-2025, Germany was actively involved in this process. However, it suspended its humanitarian admission programs, including the program under § 22.2 of the Residence Act. Over three years, about 2,600 dissidents at risk of political persecution were able to benefit from the program (*Sergei Satanovskii, 2025*).

Those who cannot obtain a Russian travel document because of ongoing persecution are also unable to receive humanitarian visas. They are forced to remain in CIS countries, where entry is possible with an internal passport, but without the option to leave. The

mechanism for issuing grey passports (foreign passports – *Vorläufiger Reisepass*) exists in all EU countries, but in practice, it is applied only in exceptional cases, especially for those who are outside the Schengen area and do not have a valid residence in one of the member states (*Akhmedova, 2024*). Even for dissidents already living in Germany, getting a foreign passport is often a problem. Vladimir Volokhonsky, an independent municipal deputy from Saint Petersburg facing three politically motivated charges in Russia, moved to Germany on humanitarian grounds after politically motivated administrative pressure in Serbia. Because of the criminal prosecution, he was refused a national travel document, and the authorities also denied him a *Vorläufiger Reisepass*. Instead, he was advised to apply for asylum. Volokhonsky works, pays taxes and social contributions, and does not need social benefits or the obligations of asylum status. Moreover, applying for asylum would deprive him of the right to work.

In this context, this paper proposes a comprehensive overview of the problems faced by people persecuted for political reasons, as well as an assessment of the risks of staying in such countries. This is needed for a more systematic and informed approach by the German authorities to humanitarian admission.

## 4. Extradition requests

Extradition requests in politically motivated cases remain a key tool of transnational repression. Russia and Belarus use not only bilateral treaties but also the multilateral Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on the Interstate Search for Persons (hereinafter: interstate search) (*Soglashenie o mezhgosudarstvennom rozyske [Agreement on Interstate Search]*, n.d.). This instrument allows them to bypass Interpol filters and secure the detention of opponents abroad (*Soglashenie o mezhgosudarstvennom rozyske [Agreement on Interstate Search]*, n.d.). The danger of this mechanism is that, unlike Interpol, it does not provide for any review of political motivation and, in practice, automatically triggers arrest procedures. According to this treaty, a person is listed as a wanted individual through the interstate search system without verifying the legitimacy of the request or its political motivation, essentially without any criteria. Once listed, a citizen of any of the listed countries may face arrest, the imposition of preventive measures, and be at risk of extradition to the country of citizenship. Member countries where the interstate search is practiced include the Republic of Azerbaijan, the Republic of Armenia, the Republic of Belarus, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan. In

reality, no checks are carried out to determine whether a request is politically motivated before adding someone to the interstate wanted list, unlike Interpol procedures. Countries that are part of this multilateral agreement can add names to the database almost automatically. After that, a person wanted for political reasons by one of the member states can be detained and extradited from the territory of any other country in the agreement. We look at such cases in individual countries below.

The reaction of countries that have received tens of thousands of Russian and Belarusian dissidents since 2022 has varied. In Central Asia, extradition requests are carried out most consistently, including forced returns and long periods of detention. Armenia does not take steps toward actual extradition, but reacts formally to such requests, often by restricting the right to leave the country. Georgia is not part of the multilateral agreement, but it exerts pressure on Russian and Belarusian dissidents through entry bans without explanation. Since 2024, The Ark (Kovcheg) project has recorded deportations of dissidents under pretexts and a tightening of residence rules. In the Balkans, the practice is more mixed: the states are not parties to the CIS agreement, but they apply administrative pressure such as deportations and entry bans.

## 4. Extradition requests

In Kazakhstan, extradition has become a tool to demonstrate loyalty to Moscow. In December 2022, former FSO officer Mikhail Zhilin was detained at Astana airport and extradited to Russia only a month later, despite his asylum application (*Informburo.kz*, 2022). In October 2023, Yakut activist Aikhal Ammosov (Igor Ivanov) faced the same fate. He was charged with “discrediting the army” and “justifying terrorism,” and spent a year in detention awaiting extradition. In addition, at least five other extraditions or long detentions under Russian requests were recorded in the country (*Orda*, 2024).

The situation in Kyrgyzstan is equally concerning. Alongside formal cooperation, there are also cases of direct involvement of security services in abductions. In June 2023, activist Alyona Krylova of “Left Resistance” was arrested in Bishkek under charges of “organizing an extremist community” (under Article 282.1 of the Russian Criminal Code). Her detention has been repeatedly extended (*Osmonalieva*, 2023). In October 2023, her colleague Lev Skoryakin was abducted on the street and handed over to the FSB without any court procedure, and in Russia, he was subjected to torture (*Pikulicka-Wilczewska*, 2024). According to human rights defenders, there were at least three more such cases (*The Insider*, 2023).

Since 2022, Armenia has also formally applied CIS mechanisms. In February 2023, Nikita Kamensky was detained

at Yerevan airport for anti-war graffiti. He was released within hours but received a travel ban, leaving him in a state of “legal limbo” (*Asafyev*, 2023). In May 2023, Maria Rous was detained on charges of “spreading fakes” and “incitement to extremism.” She was released under a pledge not to leave, but was also banned from leaving the country. She managed to go to the EU only after receiving a humanitarian visa (*OVD-Info*, 2023). Dozens of such cases were documented in Armenia, where people remain trapped for months or even years, often in an irregular status, unless provided with a temporary travel document by an EU country.

In the Balkans, the response to extradition requests has been more cautious. In Serbia, in October 2023, Belarusian filmmaker Andrei Gniot was detained on the basis of an Interpol red notice. He was first placed in detention and then under house arrest, but eventually managed to leave the country without being extradited (*Amnesty International Eurasia*, 2024). Montenegro took a similar approach: in July 2024, Inga Pelinigras was detained in Podgorica under a red notice, but was quickly released by court and later granted asylum in Italy (*Human Rights Action*, 2024). These examples show that Balkan courts are able to take political context into account and refuse extradition.

Turkey was previously considered an exception: until September 2025, there were no documented politically motivated

#### 4. Extradition requests

ed extraditions under bilateral requests. However, in September 2025, a new case demonstrated direct cooperation between the Russian and Turkish Interpol bureaus. A dissident was detained and ordered deported based on infor-

mation supplied by Russia, despite the political nature of the charges. This practice undermines the assumption of Turkey as a safe or neutral transit country and signals the emergence of risks similar to those in CIS states.

## 5. Use of formal legal mechanisms to target dissidents

In addition to extradition, governments in the region actively use administrative and migration procedures to put pressure on dissidents. The key tools are cancellation or refusal to extend residence permits, administrative expulsion orders, and arbitrary entry refusals. Formally, such measures are based on national legislation, usually vague references to “national security.” In practice, their use is selective and targets opposition politicians, human rights defenders, and journalists. These measures create a state of “legal limbo,” where a person loses legal status but has no access to protection procedures. Unlike extradition, administrative decisions rarely attract international attention, yet they shape an atmosphere of constant instability for exile communities, especially for those already persecuted in Russia.

### 5.1. Cancellation of residence permits and orders to leave the country

This practice has been especially visible in Serbia. In 2023, Saint Petersburg municipal deputy Vladimir Volokhonsky was notified that his residence permit was cancelled on grounds of “national security.” He was forced to leave the country (*Zrnić, 2023*). The same year, a similar measure was applied to cultural organizer Evgeny Irzhansky, who

was also banned from entering Serbia for one year (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2023*). According to human rights defenders, in 2022–2023, at least five cases were documented in Serbia where residence permits were revoked based on the vague claim of “national security threat.”

In Georgia, refusal to extend residence permits has been applied to prominent lawyers and human rights defenders. In 2022, Ivan Pavlov and other members of the “Team 29” were denied renewal of their residence permits for this reason. At the same time, Belarusian citizens fleeing repression faced mass refusals of asylum and residence permits: human rights organizations reported at least fifty such cases (*Ekho Kavkaza, 2024*). These examples show that in Georgia, administrative tools function as barriers to legal status for opposition activists.

The increasingly repressive political atmosphere has also affected dissidents already living in Georgia. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, at least 28 foreign nationals were deported for allegedly participating in protests. Many of these deportations took place without proper legal procedures, and in some cases, the individuals had no connection to demonstrations at all (*Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association,*

2024). In several cases, activists were pressured to leave the country without formal charges or court rulings. Ministry officials escorted them to the Armenian border, a practice that violates both national and international norms on due process and protection against arbitrary removal (*The New Times*, 2024).

### 5.2. Arbitrary entry refusals

The most widespread practice of entry refusals is observed in Georgia. Since 2022, so-called “silent refusals” have been recorded — entry bans without explanation and without written decisions. Well-known examples include Russian opposition politician Dmitry Gudkov and journalist Philipp Dzyadko (*Paper-paper*, 2023). In 2023, journalist Mikhail Aleshkovsky faced the same treatment and was not allowed to return after a short trip abroad (*Mchedlishvili*, 2022). According to IDFI, more than 3,000 such refusals occurred in 2022–2023 (*Paper-paper*, 2023). Activist Maksim Ivantsov, who had lived in Georgia since 2020, was also denied re-entry (*Social Justice Center*, 2024). Similar refusals have affected grassroots activists supporting Ukrainian refugees, running community centers, independent bloggers writing about Russia’s regions, and human rights lawyers.

Local watchdog groups, including the Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association (GYLA), Social Justice Center (Tbilisi), and Transparency International Georgia, report a growing number of such “silent

refusals” since 2024, where individuals are turned away with no records or explanations.

In Serbia, the practice is less widespread but symbolically significant. In August 2022, Pyotr Nikitin, founder of the “Russian Democratic Society,” was stopped at Belgrade airport and denied entry. After a public campaign, the ban was lifted (*Bogdanović*, 2023). In 2023, activist Ilya Zernov was denied entry and later relocated to Germany, where he received a humanitarian visa (*Current Time*, 2023).

In Turkey, in May 2023, FBK journalist Iri-na Alleman was denied entry and given a five-year ban (*Current Time*, 2023). Human rights defenders note that such cases are linked less to political persecution in the country of origin and more to her reporting on Turkey’s domestic politics. More broadly, the lack of transparency in migration bureaucracy creates problems with residence renewals and sudden refusals. These issues are part of systemic instability in Turkey’s migration policy and not aimed at a particular group. A new practice emerged in 2025 that directly links administrative measures with Russian requests. The September 2025 case of a deportation based on information from the Russian Interpol bureau illustrates that national security references are now being used to target dissidents with anti-war views. This marks a shift from general bureaucratic opacity to politically motivated cooperation with Russia.

## 5. Use of formal legal mechanisms to target dissidents

Formal legal instruments have become one of the most effective and convenient ways for governments to pressure dissidents. Their special feature is that they minimize public conflict: cancellation of residence or entry refusal is presented as an administrative measure, though in reality it functions as political

repression. Serbia and Georgia apply such measures most actively, while Turkey's challenges are rooted more in bureaucratic barriers. For dissidents, this results in a constant state of vulnerability and the impossibility of long-term planning.

## 6. Illegal actions

In addition to formal legal instruments, governments in the region resort to illegal methods of pressure: abductions and forced returns of dissidents to Russia and Belarus outside extradition procedures. These actions take place in violation of court procedures and international obligations, and are often carried out with the direct involvement of Russian security services or in coordination with local law enforcement. Dissidents are also subjected to threats, attacks, and other forms of intimidation, which are not directly carried out by the state but are left without investigation by the authorities.

Such practices are especially common in Central Asia and Armenia, where Russia's presence is most visible and national institutions are weak in resisting external pressure. In the Balkans and in Georgia, illegal actions more often take the form of pressure and threats from pro-Kremlin groups or the authorities themselves, rather than direct abductions.

### 6.1. Abductions and forced returns

Kyrgyzstan has become one of the most vulnerable points. In June 2023, Alexey Rozhkov, accused of setting fire to a military enlistment office, was handed over to Russia without an extradition procedure. It was later reported that he had been subjected to torture (Kondratyev, 2023). In October of the same year, activist Lev Skoryakin was

abducted on the street in Bishkek by special forces and handed to the FSB without court proceedings or extradition procedure (Pikulicka-Wilczewska, 2024). According to human rights defenders, there have been at least two more such cases in the country.

In Armenia, direct violations have also been recorded. In 2023, Dmitry Setrakov was abducted in Gyumri and soon appeared in Russia; investigations revealed the involvement of Russian military personnel stationed in Armenia (*Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor*, 2023). In the same year, Anatoly Shchetinin was detained while visiting the Russian consulate in Yerevan and soon transferred to Russian authorities without a court decision (*Helsinki Citizens' Assembly-Vanadzor*, 2024). At least three such cases have been documented in Armenia.

In Kazakhstan, abductions have also taken the form of joint operations. In 2024, deserter Kamil Kasimov was seized with the involvement of local police and Russian military personnel and forcibly returned to Russia (*Ulitin*, 2024). In 2024, Evgeny Nazarenko was detained at the airport and handed over to Russia without access to court (*Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 2024). These cases show that the authorities in Kazakhstan tend to cooperate directly with Russian structures, violating basic guarantees of protection.



### 6.2. Unlawful pressure on dissidents

In the Balkans, illegal methods appear in the form of direct pressure and intimidation. In Serbia, in December 2022, unknown individuals disrupted a meeting of the “Russian Democratic Society,” threatening participants while the police did not intervene (*Yapparova, 2023*). In 2023, activist Ilya Zernov was beaten near graffiti with the symbol of the Wagner private military company, which he was trying to cover. The attack was never investigated (*Current Time, 2023*). Such episodes are not isolated: threats, “Z” markings on the homes of exiles, and other forms of intimidation have been repeatedly documented.

In Montenegro, in 2023, activist Maksim Novichkov was attacked after launching a petition against the use of the Z-symbol in Podgorica (*Rybakova, 2024*). This case shows the vulnerability of activists even when acting within legal frameworks.

In Georgia, illegal actions were more institutionalized. In 2023, Russian activist Rafail Shepelev was lured into

so-called South Ossetia, where he was detained and handed to the FSB (*Dept. One, 2025*). In addition, during mass anti-war protests, at least 28 Russian participants were expelled without court rulings (*Georgian Young Lawyers’ Association, 2024*). This demonstrates that even in relatively more liberal states of the South Caucasus, the government is ready to use illegal methods to pressure the opposition.

Illegal actions form a second – shadow – line of transnational repression. In Central Asia they take the form of direct cooperation between local authorities and Russian security services, leading to abductions and forced returns. In Armenia, in violation of national sovereignty, Russian authorities use the personnel of the military base to pursue individuals who refused to fight for Russia. In Serbia, Montenegro, and Georgia, pressure manifests in attacks, threats, and sudden expulsions. These practices undermine trust in national law enforcement systems and create an atmosphere of fear within exile communities, while also deepening the uncertainty of those already facing political persecution in Russia and Belarus.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This policy paper has documented the scope and mechanisms of transnational repression targeting Russian and Belarusian dissidents in non-EU countries since February 2022. Based on evidence collected across the Western Balkans, South Caucasus, Central Asia, and Turkey, several key patterns have emerged:

### **None of the non-EU countries examined can be considered fully safe:**

Although many of these countries serve as critical entry points, especially for those without foreign travel passports, their legal frameworks, political alignments, and law enforcement practices make them unreliable sanctuaries in the long term. Across regions, dissidents face politically motivated detentions, administrative harassment, travel bans, deportations, and even abductions.

### **Transnational repression varies by region:**

- **Central Asia** (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) presents the highest risk. Both countries cooperate actively with Russian law enforcement through the CIS Interstate Search system. Documented cases include arbitrary detentions, abductions, and forced returns without due process. These countries are no longer viable safe havens, despite visa-free access and allowance for entry using internal Russian IDs.
- **The South Caucasus** shows a mixed picture. Armenia does not conduct forced extraditions in political cases but imposes long-term travel bans based on CIS alerts, effectively trapping dissidents in legal limbo. Georgia, once a hub for exiles, has become increasingly unsafe due to growing authoritarianism, anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and arbitrary expulsions. The legal protections are deteriorating.
- **The Western Balkans** (Serbia and Montenegro) offer relatively more legal predictability. Serbia has revoked residence permits of outspoken anti-war activists on vague “national security” grounds, though no documented forced returns have occurred. Montenegro has avoided participation in politically motivated extraditions, but societal hostility has emerged, particularly from radical pro-Kremlin groups.
- **Turkey has until recently been considered an important initial escape route and logistical hub**, especially due to direct flights and visa-free entry. However, the September 2025 case of deportation based on Russian Interpol input demonstrates that Turkey is no longer free from politically motivated cooperation with Moscow. While the scale of such cases remains limited, this prece-

dent undermines Turkey's status as a relatively safe transit hub for dissidents.

**Exiled dissidents face pressure even without formal charges:** The report highlights that many targeted individuals have no pending criminal charges in their home countries. Nevertheless, they are harassed due to public anti-war activism, civic participation, or opposition affiliations. In several countries, administrative practices such as denial of entry, visa revocation, or refusal to extend residence status are used to silence dissent without judicial oversight.

**The CIS Interstate Search system bypasses international safeguards:** Unlike Interpol, the CIS extradition and wanted persons mechanism lacks political motivation screening. Its use by Russia and Belarus has led to widespread abuse. Countries like Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan rely on this system and often impose travel bans or detain individuals without adequately verifying the legitimacy of the charges.

**Politically motivated persecution mimics ordinary criminal charges:** Both Russia and Belarus increasingly prosecute dissidents using non-political criminal articles, such as vandalism, fraud, or terrorism, to obscure the political nature of persecution. This practice undermines the ability of host countries to recognize political motivation and grants authoritarian states plausible deniability.

### Summary recommendations:

This policy paper underscores the urgent need for coordinated international action to provide safe passage, legal certainty, and protection to dissidents trapped in third countries. Without such support, the growing apparatus of cross-border repression will continue to erode basic guarantees of safety and justice for those who oppose authoritarian regimes:

- EU member states should issue humanitarian visas and temporary travel documents outside the country of citizenship or legal residence, especially for individuals trapped in third countries with no access to their documents.
- Legal assistance and rapid response mechanisms must be expanded in countries of first refuge, especially in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, where formal legal systems fail to guarantee protection.
- The EU and international institutions should condition political engagement and development aid on the respect for due process, freedom of movement, and protection from arbitrary detention.
- Programs that fund civil society and human rights activities in these regions must include specific components for the legal and consular protection of at-risk foreign dissidents, not only citizens.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

- Greater transparency and scrutiny are needed over how CIS member states implement interstate search requests, with advocacy to introduce political motivation filters akin to Interpol's Article 3.

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### Anastasia Burakova

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