

Aleksandra Kuczyńska-Zonik

## Where Is the Center of the Belarusian Opposition Today? The Relocation of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya's Office

Since the 2020 presidential election, Belarusian opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya has resided in Lithuania due to fears of political repression in Belarus. In mid-January 2026, she announced that she and her office would relocate to Warsaw. The main reason for this decision was the Lithuanian authorities' decision to downgrade Tsikhanouskaya's protective status, which—according to her associates—raised serious concerns about her long-term security.

**Determinants of the decision to relocate Tsikhanouskaya's office.** Since 2020, Vilnius had remained the principal center of activity for the Belarusian democratic opposition in exile (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 247](#)), while Lithuania itself was viewed as a state providing both diplomatic support and personal security to opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and her team (["IEŚ Commentaries", No. 235](#)). Tsikhanouskaya did not hold diplomatic status and was therefore not entitled to diplomatic immunity; however, she was granted official guest status. This status is typically accorded, among others, to ambassadors of foreign states, heads of missions of international organizations accredited in Lithuania, members of foreign governments, and members of the European Commission. In practice, this meant that Tsikhanouskaya could benefit from privileges afforded to individuals with special (VIP) status during air travel. According to estimates by the Lithuanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, maintaining her VIP status and providing round-the-clock physical protection required expenditures of approximately €1 million annually.

In October 2025, Lithuania reduced the level of physical protection afforded to Tsikhanouskaya, concluding that the threat posed by foreign intelligence services had diminished. Responsibility for her protection was transferred from the Dignitary Protection Service (*Vadovybės apsaugos tarnyba*), which safeguards Lithuania's highest state officials, to the Criminal Police Bureau (*Kriminalinės policijos biuras*). The latter is responsible for protecting individuals without special political or diplomatic status who nevertheless face a credible risk to their safety, such as witnesses or victims of crime.

Tsikhanouskaya's entourage expressed concern that Vilnius was no longer a sufficiently secure environment for conducting political activity directed against the Belarusian regime, particularly in light of what her team described as an increased threat from Belarusian security services (the KGB). As a result, a decision was taken to move the headquarters of her office to Poland. On 13 January, Tsikhanouskaya met with Polish President Karol Nawrocki, who expressed readiness to support the independence aspirations of the Belarusian people.

**Political and social tensions in Lithuania.** The decision to downgrade the level of protection afforded to the Belarusian opposition leader elicited mixed reactions in Lithuania. Government representatives argued that the direct threat to Tsikhanouskaya and her team had decreased and that the leader herself played a limited role in ongoing democratization processes in Belarus. Asked to comment, Lithuanian Prime Minister Inga Ruginienė stated that she saw neither added value nor losses resulting from the relocation of Tsikhanouskaya's office to Warsaw, while emphasizing that Lithuania's relations with the Belarusian opposition remain strong and are not dependent on a single individual.

By contrast, critics of the decision from conservative circles expressed concern that it could negatively affect Lithuania's international image as a state consistently supporting democratic movements. In their view (Žygimantas Pavilionis, Gabrieliūš Landsbergis), reducing the level of support for the Belarusian opposition could be perceived as a departure from Lithuania's value-based foreign policy. Similarly, the leaders of the Liberal

Movement (Viktorija Čmilytė-Nielsen) and the Union of Democrats “For Lithuania” (Saulius Skvernelis) pointed to political and economic considerations, such as a desire to revise Lithuania’s foreign policy priorities (including the possible easing of sanctions on Belarus) and to reduce the costs associated with hosting the Belarusian opposition. Interestingly, Laurynas Kasčiūnas, leader of the Homeland Union–Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), offered a somewhat different assessment, suggesting that Tsikhanouskaya had not been sufficiently active as an opposition leader. Kasčiūnas had also long criticized the Belarusian diaspora in Lithuania, among other things for failing to provide sufficient support to Ukraine following Russia’s invasion.

In the context of the media debate surrounding opposition activities, the issue of the so-called ideology of “Litvinism” also emerged—the belief that the population of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania constituted a Belarusian nation and that Belarus should therefore be regarded as the heir to this medieval state. Such a narrative may pose risks to Lithuania’s independence and territorial integrity, as it implicitly questions Lithuanian statehood. As evidence, commentators cited statements made by the Belarusian opposition leader’s husband, Siarhei Tsikhanouski, on YouTube in July 2025. At the time, he stated that if efforts to overthrow Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s regime were unsuccessful, Belarusians living in exile could form autonomous “islands.” Lithuanian media initially interpreted this statement as a suggestion to create autonomous Belarusian structures on Lithuanian territory. Tsikhanouskaya’s office categorically rejected these interpretations, emphasizing that the Belarusian democratic opposition consistently condemns all manifestations of Litvinism, recognizes Lithuania’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, and treats such narratives as elements of disinformation inspired by Russian and Belarusian security services.

**A high-level meeting.** Also noteworthy was the meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Belarusian opposition leader, which took place in Vilnius during commemorations of the 163rd anniversary of the January Uprising. Tsikhanouskaya expressed full solidarity with the Ukrainian people and deep respect for President Zelenskyy’s leadership. She also thanked the Ukrainian president for accepting released political prisoners from Belarus. As a result of efforts by the United States, Alyaksandr Lukashenka released more than 100 political prisoners at the end of 2025, including individuals of Belarusian, Polish, and Lithuanian origin. Many of them were transferred to Ukraine, a move intended to symbolically exclude Lithuania from the prisoner-release process.

The meeting between Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was also significant because earlier misunderstandings between representatives of the Belarusian democratic opposition and Ukrainian society had hindered closer cooperation. Tsikhanouskaya had accused Ukraine of limited engagement in assisting protesters after the 2020 presidential election, while she herself had been criticized for insufficient activity in support of Belarus’s democratization.

**Conclusions and forecasts.** The immediate reason for Tsikhanouskaya’s decision to leave Vilnius and relocate her office to Poland was security-related. Her previous status in Lithuania, however, had not only practical but also symbolic significance—it underscored the special position of the Belarusian opposition leader in Lithuania’s foreign policy and her role as a representative of the democratic aspirations of Belarusian society.

In Lithuanian public debate, the decision to relocate the Belarusian opposition office to Warsaw has been framed within a broader discussion on the limits of a host state’s responsibility, national security priorities, and the political and symbolic costs of long-term support for foreign opposition movements. Secondary themes related to Litvinism also point to underlying political and social tensions between Lithuanian society and the Belarusian opposition.

Establishing the Belarusian opposition office in Poland may have multidimensional consequences. For Lithuania, it entails a partial loss of its role as the primary center of activity for the Belarusian democratic opposition, while maintaining the presence of a large political diaspora in Vilnius. From Poland’s perspective, the relocation may signal a willingness to assume a more active role in supporting democratic opposition forces in Belarus.

The change in location may also influence the operational environment of the Belarusian opposition in Poland, providing greater stability due to Poland’s size, geographic position, and standing in European and international



affairs. As a result, the relocation may alter the opposition's operating conditions and channels of engagement with Western partners. Moreover, the absence of significant tensions between Polish and Belarusian societies, combined with the relatively low level of politicization of the Belarusian diaspora in Poland's public debate, may have a stabilizing effect on the activities of Tsikhanouskaya's office in Poland.