EMOTIONAL DISPLACEMENT AND THE FRAGILITY OF BELONGING. THE MEANING OF HOMING IN ITS TRANSITION

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Abstract. This study investigates how Belarusian migrants and political exiles reconfigure the meaning of home and belonging following forced displacement after the 2020 political crisis. The object of inquiry is the emotional and symbolic reconstruction of home in exile, shaped by practices of homing, relational care, and identity negotiation. The main task is to examine how migrants experience and enact belonging in uncertain sociopolitical landscapes, and how emotional geographies and symbolic rituals serve as coping mechanisms amid loss, mobility, and precarity. This study asks: how is home performed beyond physical space? What makes belonging possible in contexts of rupture? The study employs a qualitative methodology, grounded in reflexive thematic analysis of 13 in-depth interviews with Belarusian migrants living in Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia. Data were coded to trace patterns in affective spatial practices, identity transformations, and diasporic community formation. The analysis draws on theoretical frameworks from diaspora studies, emotional geography, and feminist theory, particularly the works of Brah, Ahmed, and Blunt & Dowling. Findings reveal that home is not a static location but a mobile, affective infrastructure — reassembled through sensory cues, symbolic objects, and everyday rituals. Belonging emerges through emotional labor, repetition, and relational investments, often despite legal and spatial instability. Participants describe homing as a dynamic process: making

spaces livable through routine, care, and memory. Communities in exile are revealed as fluid emotional cartographies rather than fixed social networks. The study concludes that emotional displacement creates both fragility and opportunity: while rootedness is undermined, new forms of resilience, identity, and political imagination emerge. These insights contribute to migration scholarship by foregrounding the intimate, embodied, and relational dimensions of belonging, offering a nuanced understanding of exile not only as loss but also as a site of becoming.

Keywords: Belarusian migration, homing practices, emotional geography, belonging, exile, identity transformation, diaspora communities.

Introduction

Although my academic background lies in the fields of human genetics and gender studies, my recent scholarly trajectory has shifted toward the interdisciplinary domain of migration research. This transition is not incidental, but reflects a deeper epistemological and ethical commitment: to use academic inquiry as a means of exploring questions that are at once structural and intimate, theoretical and lived. In contexts of displacement and uncertainty, research becomes more than a method — it serves as a mode of orientation, a way to engage with the gendered, emotional, and existential dimensions of uprooted life.

This engagement is grounded in a set of recurring questions that emerge in moments of rupture: Where is home now? How is home performed and perceived? What conditions make homing possible? How do we inhabit space amid instability? And what symbolic anchors and relational practices guide us in constructing a sense of belonging in exile?

These questions are explored through the lived experiences of Belarusian migrants who left their country in the aftermath of the 2020 presidential election — a political turning point that triggered one of the most significant waves of repression and forced migration in the country's modern history. In the months following the election, the Belarusian regime initiated a crackdown on civil society, journalists, academics, artists, and ordinary citizens participating in peaceful protest. The brutality of state violence — including arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced disappearances — resulted in a humanitarian crisis and a mass exodus. By the end of 2021, tens of thousands of Belarusians had fled to neighboring countries such as Lithuania, Poland, Ukraine, and Georgia, with many continuing on to Western Europe or North America.

This wave of migration was not driven by economic necessity or long-term planning, but by rupture, trauma, and survival. As a result, the question of home became not merely logistical, but deeply existential. Displacement disrupted not only geography but also networks of meaning, identity, and attachment. The loss of home was multilayered: the disappearance of physical space, the severing of communal ties, and the collapse of a political project rooted in democratic aspirations.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretivist design aimed at exploring how Belarusian migrants and political exiles construct meanings of *home* and *belonging* in contexts of rupture and uncertainty. It follows the epistemological premise that knowledge about displacement is co-produced through affective, situated, and dialogical engagement (Mason 2002; Haraway 1988). Reflexivity, empathy, and attention to emotional geographies are treated not as bias but as critical instruments of inquiry (Ellingson 2006; Rose 1993).

Research Design

The study is grounded in a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) as developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). TA was chosen for its flexibility in identifying both patterned and nuanced meanings within subjective narratives. The analysis moved iteratively between inductive coding (emerging from participants' lived accounts) and deductive attention to theoretical constructs drawn from Brah, Ahmed, and Blunt & Dowling. This double movement allowed the research to maintain fidelity to participants' voices while situating them within broader conceptual debates on emotional displacement.

The analytic process followed Braun and Clarke's six-phase model:
1. Familiarization through repeated reading and memo-writing;
2. Initial coding (semantic and latent) of meaning units across transcripts;
3. Theme generation via clustering of related codes into conceptual patterns;
4. Reviewing themes in relation to theoretical framing and whole dataset coherence;
5. Defining and naming themes; and
6. Producing the narrative synthesis integrating theory and empirical illustration.

Throughout, analysis was conducted reflexively, acknowledging the researcher's dual role as both observer and participant in the wider Belarusian diaspora. This positionality was used as a resource rather than an obstacle,facilitating interpretive depth and affective attunement to the field.

Participants and Data Collection

The empirical material comprises 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Belarusian migrants residing in Lithuania, Poland, and Georgia. Participants were recruited through community networks and snowball sampling to ensure diversity of age, gender, occupation, and migration status (e.g., humanitarian visa, asylum, temporary protection).

Interviews were conducted between 2024 and early 2025 in Belarusian or Russian, each lasting 45–90 minutes. They explored three thematic blocks:

1. Meanings of home and belonging;
2. Mobility and displacement;
3. Symbolic practices, identity, and social relationships.

Fieldwork was designed to elicit both narrative and sensory dimensions of homing. Participants were invited to describe spaces, objects, smells, and gestures that evoked safety or estrangement — an approach inspired by *emotional geography* (Davidson, Bondi & Smith 2005) and *material culture* methods (Tolia-Kelly 2004). Notes on tone, pauses, and non-verbal cues were recorded immediately after each interview to preserve emotional texture.

Data were analyzed through an iterative, inductive process of coding and interpretation. Key thematic clusters emerged around:

- Practices of Homing (domestic routines, spatial practices, sensory familiarity);
- Belonging and Community (diasporic networks, social care, mutual support);
- Symbolic Anchors (objects, memories, rituals, language);
- Spatial Navigation (housing precarity, transience, interaction with host environments);
- Emotional Geographies (feelings of loss, safety, alienation, hope, and rootedness).

Ethical Considerations

Given the political sensitivity of the topic and the emotional vulnerability of participants, the research followed strict ethical guidelines (European Commission's Horizon 2020 ethics framework and Belmont Report (1979) principles). Informed consent was obtained in all cases, with participants given the option to withdraw or skip any question. Attention was paid to emotional cues during interviews to avoid re-traumatization, and participants were offered the opportunity to review or amend their transcripts. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured throughout.

Analytical Rigour and Reflexivity

To ensure the credibility and transparency of interpretation, the study followed Tracy's (2010) framework for qualitative quality, which emphasizes *credibility*, *resonance*, and *sincerity*.
- Credibility was achieved by grounding interpretations in rich, verbatim data and by cross-checking thematic patterns through peer debriefing with migration scholars. These discussions helped challenge assumptions and refine category boundaries.
- Resonance refers to the extent to which findings evoke recognition and meaning for readers and participants. This was supported through participant feedback on transcript excerpts and through the inclusion of vivid, contextually situated narratives that communicate emotional depth.
- Sincerity involved ongoing reflexivity about the researcher's positionality within the Belarusian diaspora, documented through analytical memos that traced interpretive decisions and emotional responses throughout the process.

The methodology thus balances *emotional proximity* and *analytic distance*: it is not a neutral recording of migrant experience but a reflexive engagement with the politics of belonging as it unfolds in the everyday life of exile. Visual tools such as thematic matrices and mind maps were used to identify connections, contradictions, and silences within and across narratives. This approach made it possible to analyze not only pragmatic strategies of adaptation, but also the emotional and symbolic labor of sustaining meaning and presence in unstable conditions.

By integrating personal trajectories, theoretical insight, and grounded empirical material, this study contributes to contemporary debates on displacement, identity, and belonging. It shows how

Belarusian exiles, far from being passive victims of rupture, engage in continuous, affective world-making — crafting homes that are not inherited but improvised, not fixed but foldable, not merely remembered but actively lived in.

Conceptual Grounding

The theoretical architecture of this study interlaces Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space, Sara Ahmed's affective orientations, Blunt and Dowling's feminist geography of home, and complementary frameworks such as Morley's notion of home as a mobile constellation, the broader field of emotional geography and Yuval-Davis's distinction between emotional belonging and the politics of belonging. Together these perspectives conceptualize home as a mobile, affective infrastructure continually negotiated through emotion, embodiment, power and political recognition rather than a fixed territorial condition.

Brah (1996) characterizes diaspora space as an intersection of diaspora, border and displacement. It is not only about migrant communities but a confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes where the histories and identities of migrants and those deemed indigenous intersect. Within this space, home and displacement coexist; belonging is always contested. Adopting this lens foregrounds the migrant experiences studied here as part of a wider field of intersecting positionalities and power relations.

Ahmed's phenomenology of emotion translates spatial belonging into embodied affect. She argues that emotions involve orientation toward objects: feelings "stick" to sensory cues and orient bodies toward or away from places, people and ideas. Home is experienced through such orientations — through gestures, textures, smells and proximities that align bodies with spaces. Conversely, estrangement arises when orientations are interrupted, producing disorientation. Importantly, Ahmed distinguishes between affective orientations and affective conditions; the former refers to directional feelings, while the latter describes general emotional climates shaped by structural forces. In migrants' narratives, hope appears as an affective orientation to the future, whereas precarity or cruel optimism exemplify affective conditions that permeate everyday life.

Blunt and Dowling (2006) extend this analysis into the everyday. Their feminist geography of home reconceptualizes home not as a fixed shelter but as a matrix of social relations and emotions with wide symbolic and ideological meanings. Homemaking is a form of emotional labour and moral geography: the repetitive and ethical work through

which people make livable worlds despite instability. It encompasses practices of care, hosting, arranging and maintaining that reassemble belonging under conditions of displacement and reveals how gender, class and power shape domestic space.

Complementary frameworks further nuance this study. Morley's idea of home as a mobile constellation emphasises that homemaking is both relational and symbolic: a network of practices, attachments and mediated meanings that travels with migrants. Emotional geography shows that space is not simply inhabited but felt, structured by affective relations of safety, memory and intimacy. Yuval-Davis distinguishes between emotional belonging and the politics of belonging: while emotional belonging refers to attachments, the politics of belonging concerns the maintenance of boundaries that separate those who belong to a community from those who do not. This distinction links migrants' affective attachments to regimes of recognition, exclusion and inequality.

By weaving these strands together, the study situates itself within a feminist-phenomenological strand of emotional geography. Home is understood as a mobile infrastructure of feeling and belonging as an ongoing negotiation across spatial, political and temporal boundaries. This conceptual scaffolding guides the qualitative design—a reflexive thematic analysis of Belarusian migrants' narratives — and informs the sampling strategy and analytic coding. It illuminates how, under conditions of political exile, diaspora space becomes not only intersectional but affectively circular, refolded through routine, imagination, digital proximity and the interplay between affective orientations and affective conditions.

Within this framework, the research explores how Belarusian migrants construct home and attachment through everyday routines, symbolic references and social relationships in politically charged, transnational settings.

Findings

The interviews revealed that homing practices were among the most immediate and tangible ways in which participants negotiated their sense of belonging in exile. While the loss of home was frequently described as profound and destabilizing, many respondents responded by engaging in small yet symbolically rich acts that recreated a feeling of safety, presence and identity in new environments.

The first cluster, Practices of Homing, focuses on the embodied, sensory, and relational dimensions of how participants created

domesticity, ritual, and meaning — often from fragments, emerged through repetition, improvisation, and a careful balance between familiarity and adaptation. As such, they offer a valuable lens through which to understand how displaced individuals reclaim a sense of self and place in unfamiliar or temporary contexts.

1. Practices of Homing:
Embodied Domesticity and Affective Anchoring

For Belarusian migrants in exile, *homing* emerged as an embodied, improvisational response to spatial and emotional dislocation — a practice through which the familiar was reassembled under precarious conditions. While many experienced the loss of home as a rupture of stability and meaning, they simultaneously engaged in creative strategies to make spaces feel livable. Through sensory routines, symbolic artifacts, and spatial agency, participants reassembled feelings of familiarity and control, often in provisional or precarious housing situations. These gestures — arranging objects, maintaining rituals, re-establishing sensory familiarity — constitute what Blunt and Dowling (2006) describe as the *emotional labour of homemaking*: the daily work of turning uncertainty into coherence.

Defining Home: Affective Anchors and Imaginative Assemblages

"Home is what you truly are — how you feel right now".

Participants' narratives revealed that *home* was less a fixed container and more a relational process enacted through repetition and sensory alignment. Ahmed's (2006) notion of *orientation* helps conceptualize this — homing as the bodily act of turning toward stability within a disoriented world. The smell of baked bread, the feel of linen, or the presence of a lamp became vectors of affective direction — moments when self and space briefly "faced" each other again.

Material anchors such as inherited books, textiles, or tools often functioned as mnemonic devices stabilizing subjectivity across places, carrying the residues of what Brah (1996) calls *diaspora space* — a terrain where memory and belonging intersect with displacement. Home also acted as a *zone of autonomy*: several interviewees described domestic space as "a place that works by my rules," echoing Ahmed's (2006) argument that orientation is political — it defines which bodies can shape space rather than merely inhabit it.

Hosting others became a performative assertion of belonging. Participants spoke of *home circulation* — the willingness to share one's home with those in need, and the recognition that home can be shared, lent, or recreated across contexts. Hospitality, here, was not only generosity but a form of spatial citizenship: the power to include others within one's affective domain. This fluidity complicates static models of domesticity, revealing home as a distributed network rather than a singular address. Ultimately, homing in exile was less about restoring the past than rehearsing presence — a diasporic ethics of maintenance (Brah 1996; Blunt & Dowling 2006).

Home was also framed as a space of psychological safety and expressive freedom, particularly in the context of full embodiment — including LGBTQ+ identity, self-care, and vulnerability. It was frequently described as a base: "a place I can return to if I lose everything", or "a space that restores me". For some, it was metaphorical or abstract — "messy, fragmented, and improvised" — while for others, it was anchored in tangible details: a bed, a table, a corner to drop one's belongings, a handwritten address on an envelope.

Evolving Concepts of Home and Belonging

Over time, participants' understandings of *home* transformed from fixed and inherited notions into fluid, mobile practices. In contrast to the homes of their childhood or pre-exile life — which were often associated with stability, family rituals, and material presence — their current experiences of home were shaped through intentional acts and affective investments, a mobile practice, something learned and re-imagined across borders. This transformation exemplifies what Yuval-Davis (2006) calls the *politics of belonging*: the continual negotiation of emotional attachments within shifting boundaries of recognition.

Early narratives contrasted the given home of the past with the constructed home of the present. In Belarus, home was remembered as materially grounded — a locus of kinship and predictable rhythm. In exile, homemaking required what Ahmed (1999) terms *affective re-orientation*: turning toward unfamiliar environments until they began to "feel right." Participants described the process through embodied cues — arranging beds, planting herbs, or restoring small domestic rituals — as if each act recalibrated their inner compass toward safety and agency.

"Between routines, life happens – and that's when you notice it".

Belonging, however, remained unstable, emerging as a rhythm rather than a destination. This sense of *temporal belonging*, grounded in

repetition rather than permanence, resonates with Brah's (1996) idea of *diaspora space* as performance. Even minor routines, such as coffee or lamp-lighting, served as signposts of the right to inhabit space despite legal precarity, unresolved documentation, and shared housing. Declarations like "I have a right to be here" articulate what Ahmed (2006) calls *orientation toward futurity*: the bodily stance asserting one's place in the world, *visibility*, *existence*, and the *possibility of futurity* in exile.

Hospitality again surfaced as an ethical gesture. Inviting others or sharing rooms enacted inclusion and solidarity reminiscent of the 2020 protests. Across accounts, participants described learning to "build from fragments" — a *craft of domesticity privileging* adaptability and care over permanence. This included granting themselves "permission to expand the suitcase", both metaphorically and literally, carrying the symbolic elements of home wherever they relocated.

Belonging, however, remained a more elusive and emotionally complex domain. For some, it emerged through the development of routines, through the feeling of being "emotionally and creatively in love" with a community, or through familiarity with routes and automatisms of daily life. These rhythms of life — catching the same bus, visiting the same bakery — gave shape to a quiet sense of embeddedness. At the same time, many spoke of an ambiguous, often *liminal* experience of *belonging* or as a learned competency, an ongoing affective negotiation between displacement and attachment, aligning with Yuval-Davis (2006) and Ahmed (2004). *Belonging* became a set of layered moments, not an arrival. Crucially, many emphasized that *belonging* is not something one simply enters into — it is cultivated. It grows through repetition, emotional effort, and care.

In some narratives, the memory of childhood rituals — of how one's parents hosted or maintained routines — offered a template for how *belonging* could be practiced again, deliberately and with tenderness.

Children in exile, too, were described as growing up in a world where the boundary between past and present homes was increasingly blurred. Their sense of *belonging* was often described as *fluid*, evolving with their parents' capacity to construct home anew, even in the face of instability.

In sum, participants' evolving concepts of *home* and *belonging* point to a dynamic interplay of *autonomy*, *care*, *memory*, and *improvisation*. *Homing* and *belonging* were not destinations but ongoing negotiations — emotionally laborious, at times fractured, yet full of imaginative potential. As one participant summarized:

"*Home is collapsible. You carry it and unfold it wherever you need*".

2. Mobility and Displacement

For many participants, mobility after 2020 was not a voluntary adventure but an *affective condition* — a way of living marked by movement, repetition, and the absence of closure. Displacement reconfigured not only geography but also the temporal structure of life. Everyday routines became provisional, plans suspended, and even the sense of future fragmented into visa cycles or school terms. In this rhythm of uncertainty, *home became a choreography of temporary stability*, repeatedly assembled and disassembled.

> *"Every time I moved, it felt like leaving a possible future behind".*
> *"I always tried to return the place to its original state and leave behind a symbolic seed — a small gift for the space".*

The inability to shape a rented space, or the choice to buy a beautiful but ultimately disposable object, reflected a tension between impermanence and presence. As one participant said:

> *"At first, I had no influence on my surroundings. The way the space was, that's how it stayed".*

Living in Transit: The Aesthetics of the Provisional

Participants described long sequences of relocations — across borders, rented apartments, and temporary accommodations. This "life with a suitcase" epitomizes what Malkki (1992) terms the *national order of things* disrupted: people once categorized as sedentary citizens were thrust into mobile, uncertain statuses. Yet within this rupture, many cultivated what Ahmed (1999) calls *affective orientation*: subtle bodily adjustments that make transience bearable. They created micro-environments of comfort — arranging notebooks, lighting warm lamps, or keeping symbolic objects visible — to restore continuity between body and space.

> *"I had a year of travel with one suitcase. Everything essential plus embroidery threads, red and white, like the folk patterns — fit inside".*

This everyday labour of adaptation carried both exhaustion and beauty. Participants noted that "the hardest to lose are the processes, not the furniture," signalling that mobility unsettles habits of embodiment rather than possessions. Cleaning, cooking, or decorating newly rented flats became acts of spatial claiming — small assertions that "I am

here." Through such gestures, displacement became *felt* as both loss and creation: a practice of maintaining coherence amid fragmentation.

Emotional Weight and the Politics of Temporariness

Displacement entailed profound emotional costs: grief, fragmentation, financial uncertainty, and existential fatigue. Many participants struggled with the sense of a collapsed future, describing a world with no imaginable trajectory forward. They mourned not only their lost homes but also the ability to plan, to hope, to fully relax into life.

Repeated moves, legal precarity, and indefinite waiting produced emotional fatigue — what participants described as "living in suspended breath" — alert, adaptive, but never fully present. These accounts illustrate *the emotional geography of liminality* (Bondi et al. 2005): migrants remain alert and adaptable, yet rarely at rest. Many could imagine catastrophic futures but struggled to envision ordinary continuity. This incapacity to project oneself forward reveals how displacement alters temporal belonging; the future shrinks into administrative intervals.

The inability to control timelines or return to closed homes weighed heavily. People spoke of frozen apartments, spaces gone dormant, and the phobia of abandoned homes. Some said it was painful just to imagine their empty homes, and they longed to send someone to "add presence to the void".

The condition of living in constant alertness — unable to simultaneously feel both safe and mobile — shaped their emotional rhythms:

"You can't live in both states at once. In the tense state, you can act fast. In the relaxed one, you can see beauty".

Other narratives revealed how resisting the feeling of being at home could delay hard decisions — a way to remain in limbo:

"If I let myself feel at home, I'd have no excuse not to take the next big step".
"I'm stuck in-between — I don't have to decide anything yet".

One of the most painful experiences reported was the inability to return home:

"What hurts most is not being allowed back. I don't have the right to live or build a life there".
"In Belarus, I didn't need to defend myself. We were equals".

Mobility Connections: Holding on across Distance

Emotional geographies of exile are not defined solely by absence; they are sustained through *distributed presence*. Participants maintained transnational attachments via digital communication, familiar recipes, or cherished objects. These connections formed what Brah (1996) describes as *diaspora space* — a network of overlapping homes that coexist in memory and imagination rather than geography. Through photos, playlists, and inherited heirlooms, they enacted a form of *affective archiving* that kept past and present intertwined.

Social media, for example, functioned as both connective tissue and emotional burden: it allowed visibility but also reminded migrants of what was lost. Still, many preferred this liminal form of belonging to the erasure of silence. They lived "between absences," constructing a sense of continuity across dispersed locations — an echo of Morley's (2000) argument that contemporary homes are increasingly *mediated and mobile*.

"Being Belarusian now is a choreography through uncertainty".

Participants also carried a wide array of physical and emotional items from home to home — what some called *portable rituals* or *anchor objects*. These included tea sets, children's toys, national embroidery threads, letters, photographs, and even protest symbols. For many, these were more than objects; they were vehicles of *continuity*, *care*, and *identity*. The act of laying out a familiar object, or simply remembering the layout of a past apartment, offered emotional grounding in uncertain contexts.

Displacement Adaptation: Grounding and Improvising or Fragile
Balance of Motion and Stillness

Relocation transformed participants' relationships to *home* and self. The metaphor of standing on a two-legged stool, needing a third leg — *groundedness* — recurred in several accounts. Some emphasized the freedom not to rebuild a full home each time, instead enhancing the everyday:

"Just because it's temporary doesn't mean it shouldn't be beautiful".

Adaptation often relied on what participants called "building a shell" — an interior space of control amidst external instability. For some, this took material form in decorating; for others, it manifested through

internalized rituals like morning yoga, tea ceremonies, or curating playlists for new cities. Such practices exemplify Ahmed's (2006) concept of *affective alignment*: through repetition, bodies learn to inhabit the unfamiliar until it begins to "feel like home".

Yet even within this temporal compression, participants resisted despair through aesthetic and affective improvisation. Participants described resisting large purchases, instead investing in *temporary beauty*: a monthly bouquet, a warm lamp, or a carefully prepared meal represented what Morley (2000) might call *acts of re-domestication* — efforts to make the mobile life symbolically inhabitable. Such choices assert agency over space and time, contesting the passivity often ascribed to displaced populations. Routines and rituals — especially those tied to sensory pleasure or bodily comfort — helped ease this *in-betweenness*.

"The hardest to lose are the processes, not the furniture — the little systems that grounded me".
"Every time I arrive in a new place, I want to clean it, to claim it as mine".

Mobility, paradoxically, also expanded horizons of self-definition. Several participants reported feeling more expressive and autonomous abroad, echoing the emancipatory potential within displacement noted by Brah (1996). Migration disrupted normative boundaries of belonging, enabling experimentation with identity and lifestyle. The road, however uncertain, became a site of self-making rather than mere loss.

Ultimately, the interviews reveal that displacement produces a double consciousness: the desire to move and the longing to stay. Participants lived in tension between fluidity and rootedness, a state that Ahmed (1999) might describe as *being in movement without direction*. Many expressed the wish to "drop the bags" — to inhabit slowness and permanence — even while recognizing that mobility had become integral to their sense of self. This paradox marks the emotional grammar of post-2020 Belarusian exile: *a belonging sustained through impermanence.*

Mobility here is not a temporary disruption but a durable condition of life. Through repetitive gestures of adaptation, these migrants practice what can be called *affective endurance*: a resilience built not on certainty but on the capacity to keep reorienting, to find livability in motion. In this light, displacement becomes both geography and method — a way of continually composing oneself amid the instability of the world.

Participants frequently expressed the inner shift from defining *home* purely as place to recognizing it as an active process — a shell, a cocoon, a composition of rituals, things, and care work.

"My home is where I am and my child is".

Others spoke of growing out of *minimalism* and *mobility*: while earlier in life they prided themselves on flexibility and lightness, later experiences underscored the need for *rootedness*, *stability*, and *creative agency*.

This evolving relationship to displacement — from survival to strategic adaptation — underscores the complexity of exile. It is not only about losing a place, but about negotiating the terms of living, feeling, and *belonging* across fragmented spaces and timelines.

What emerges from these narratives is not a singular trajectory, but a *kaleidoscope* of techniques and emotions — ranging from grief and improvisation to ritual and aesthetic reclamation. Together, they map how migrants recalibrate their sense of *self* in motion.

3. Identity and Social Relationships

Reassembling the Self or Becoming Otherwise:
Identity through Rupture

Migration forced participants to renegotiate who they were and how they belonged. Displacement unsettled pre-existing categories of nationality, profession, and gender, generating what Hall (1990) describes as a *diasporic subjectivity* — a self constantly produced "through difference and through transformation." Many reflected that exile marked a clear *before and after*, echoing Gilroy's (1993) notion of double consciousness: seeing one's culture simultaneously from within and from the outside.

Rather than a loss of identity, this in-betweenness often became a site of reflexive growth. Participants described feeling both detached from Belarus and newly capable of interpreting it. Through political trauma and relocation, they developed an awareness of their own moral and civic agency — what one might term a *post-sovereign selfhood*, decoupled from the authoritarian state yet rooted in shared ethical memory.

Participants spoke about *identity* as a process shaped by rupture, loss, discovery, and relational transformation. Migration catalyzed personal growth but also introduced periods of grief, confusion, and

existential recalibration. Many described a deep internal shift — the feeling of having "grown up so much that I no longer belong to anything".

Some embraced this dislocation, describing it as a source of insight:

"There are hard periods, but when you look at the full picture, it's a fascinating experience".

Others reflected on how memory works as a bridge, enabling them to relive happiness even in retrospect:

"I already know what I will look back on and say, 'I was truly happy in that moment'".

Traumatic or transformative events — particularly the Belarusian protests — served as key *identity markers*:

"It was a before-and-after moment. That movement made us realize who we are, what we can do, what injustice means".

This process was profoundly affective. As Ahmed (2004) argues, emotions "stick" to bodies, shaping collective attachments. Anger at repression and nostalgia for community became not private feelings but organizing forces of identity. The protests of 2020 persisted as affective touchstones: they bound participants to a transnational moral landscape even when geographical proximity was impossible.

Care, Reciprocity, and the Affective Politics of Belonging

In exile, relationships became the principal medium through which identity was sustained. Acts of care — hosting friends, sharing apartments, exchanging emotional labour—operated as micro-politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006). Through these gestures, participants performed what Ahmed calls affective alignment: orienting themselves toward others who "feel right".

Such ties were rarely stable. Communities formed around projects, creative collaborations, or mutual aid initiatives and then dissolved, revealing what Brah (1996) would term the fluid temporality of diaspora space. Belonging here was not a permanent state but an ongoing negotiation of proximity and distance. Friendships that began as survival networks evolved into what participants called post-families — chosen constellations of intimacy that substituted for kin left behind: *"Georgia became the place where my family and post-family could actually meet".*

At the same time, caring too much could become exhausting. Several respondents described the need for *emotional budgeting* deciding when and how to give support as care and attention became *scarce resources*, managed with the precision of donation metaphors:

> "*Helping is like donating. You'd better give a little than regret giving too much. I want to help 100 percent, and that means knowing when I have the capacity*".

Participants described *relational budgeting* — listening only when fully present, refusing to multi-task emotional labor, protecting intimacy by intention "*now I listen only when I'm not doing anything else. Because if I divide myself, it all falls apart*".

A recurring theme was being "married to the country by love and by pragmatism", suggesting both emotional investment and compromise — emotional connection fluctuated, affected by instability, relationships, and fear of loss. This mutuality, sometimes fragile, sometimes deeply affirming, helped counterbalance the isolation of transience, which echoes feminist scholarship on affective labour (Hardt & Negri 2000; Berlant 2011): emotional energy itself becomes a scarce resource in conditions of precarity. Within these negotiations, belonging was both nurtured and rationed, revealing its economic as well as ethical dimensions.

Otherness and Emotional Distance

Despite new connections, participants frequently encountered an enduring sense of *otherness* — a feeling of being "almost at home but not quite". This liminal affect underscores Ahmed's (1999) concept of *stranger encounters*: the moment when the migrant body becomes the surface on which difference is read. Being a guest in Georgia or Poland meant continuous translation — linguistic, emotional, and moral.

> "*In this new city, I'm just a deep tourist. My foreignness follows me out the door*".

Experiences of *otherness* ranged from fleeting to profound. Participants felt like outsiders in both intimate and systemic ways. Some described becoming emotionally self-sufficient — a defense against instability. Others said their hearts were "cast in plaster" to avoid future loss:

> "*Here, I can't fall in love. It feels too childlike, like adults solve problems for me*".

Isolation was most acute during illness or vulnerability, when the absence of unconditional care exposed the fragility of exile. Yet this solitude also fostered autonomy: many learned to treat self-reliance as a survival skill. Some adopted *hyper-independence* — *"a team of one"* — but admitted this was fragile:

> *"If I get sick, the system collapses. I have to remember how to reboot it"*.

For others, depression arrived after the early euphoria of migration faded. One participant called it *"the post-party crash"*. Yet they still saw their trajectory as positive: *"it's all part of moving toward something better"*, or stating that *"the inability to be at home is part of the forward motion"*.

In this sense, the experience of not belonging generated a paradoxical form of *agency through distance*. Migration gave space to shed past pressures and claim new freedoms:

> *"Back home, being publicly visible was scary. Here, it's easier to express myself"*.

The inability to return, or to be fully included elsewhere, produced reflective subjectivities — individuals who could critique both homeland and hostland from the threshold between them.

Community as Emotional Cartography

Participants described *new communities* not as permanent affiliations, but as *fragile formations* around projects, proximity, or care, functioning as *affective laboratories* — spaces for trying out togetherness in temporary forms, even without guarantees. Recognizing the fragility of these ties — without denying their value — became a form of *diasporic wisdom*. These were improvisational, temporary, and shaped by emotional alignment more than shared histories *"communities here form around specific projects–and then dissolve"*. While across contexts, the diaspora is described not as a bounded group but as a moving emotional geography — a network traced through memory, digital media, and shared affect.

Friendships stretched across continents through chat groups and collaborative projects. These diffuse connections exemplify what Morley (2000) terms *transnational home territories*: spaces of belonging created through mobility rather than rootedness.

Some described *emotional maps* — inner geographies stitched from memory — that helped them belong to cities:

"In Minsk, I carry the city inside me. In new places, the emotional skin grows slower".

Familiar streets of Minsk were re-imagined in Vilnius or Tbilisi. Emotional maps overlapped — landscapes from Minsk, Batumi, and Lviv reconstructed in memory: "*I see the Swedish forest, but I imagine I'm at Park Čaliuskintsev*".

Recognition and contribution replaced proximity as the primary markers of community. Offering artistic work, professional skills, or civic activism became ways to "earn" presence within the diaspora space. This *ethic of contribution transformed* belonging from inheritance into praxis — a form of affective citizenship enacted through doing rather than being.

Practising Hope: From Survival to Creative Agency

Resilience appeared not as stoic perseverance but as a deeply relational phenomenon. Participants repeatedly described drawing strength from care networks — friends, collaborators, digital communities — that redistributed emotional load and validated their presence. These alliances illustrate Yuval-Davis's (2006) distinction between the *emotional* and the *political* dimensions of belonging: affective attachments become the ground on which new political subjectivities are rehearsed.

Hope, in this sense, was not a feeling but a techne — a cultivated skill. Participants spoke of "*training the muscle of asking for help*" or "*relearning how to rely on others*". The act of asking for help — once seen as a weakness — became a sign of *emotional maturity*:

> "*It's very hard to ask for help, but I'm training that muscle. It's important to have a circle where you support others and where they support you*".

Such gestures constitute the micro-pedagogies of endurance that feminist theorists have long associated with *affective labour* (Hardt & Negri 2000; Berlant 2011). Through care, humour, and mutual support, exiles collectively produced the emotional surplus that allowed life to remain livable.

Skills that Do Not Burn: Emotional Capital and Cultural Continuity

Across accounts, migrants identified a repertoire of *unsinkable skills* — *professional competencies*, *creative abilities*, and *emotional tools* and *relational capacities* that travelled with them — abilities they could rely on no matter where they landed.

"I know what I can do. I've gained separation, creative ideas, and I enjoy making them happen".

These competencies acted as *affective capital*: resources that could be re-activated across contexts, reaffirming agency within structural precarity. One participant described rediscovering self-worth through cultural work: "*I realized I had created something here, something appreciated*". Resilience was not just about survival — it was about the capacity to imagine and pursue *purpose*. One participant spoke of a deepening commitment to Belarusian cultural identity, describing it as both *resistance* and *reconstruction*:

"I want to mine Belarusian-ness — to make it richer, more visible, more appealing. To contribute to something that hundreds started before me, and that hundreds will continue after".

This echoes Brah's (1996) observation that diasporic existence entails not only rupture but the production of *new cartographies of competence*. The Belarusian case extends this argument: dispossession generates a heightened reflexivity about what can be carried — emotionally, symbolically, and materially — when everything else must be left behind. Such reflexivity constitutes a form of epistemic resilience: knowing how to rebuild the world from fragments.

Imagining Futures: Between Cruel Optimism
and Radical Tenderness

Hope in exile oscillates between aspiration and ache. Participants often articulated what Berlant (2011) terms *cruel optimism* — the attachment to futures that may never arrive, yet remain necessary for survival. Some participants described a kind of *hopeful stubbornness* — not quite optimism, but a defiant belief in transformation:

"I have this naive, silly certainty that everything is going in the right direction".

For many participants, migration became a paradoxical journey through *loss* into a form of *existential gain*. While others expressed it through radically expanded horizons:

"From a place where nothing was possible, I moved to a place where anything is. I can be anywhere on this planet and do what I want".
"At this point in my life, I've realized — I can do anything".

Hope and emotional endurance were not abstract ideals — they emerged from *grounded, embodied routines, collective memory*, and the *affective labor* of making life livable in uncertainty. Across interviews, hope appeared not as something possessed, but as something *practiced*: a skill honed through repetition, imagination, and relational constancy.

Affective Futurity and the Re-Temporing of Belonging

The temporal horizon of exile is discontinuous: it loops between suspended presents and speculative futures. Participants reported widely variable planning horizons — from weeks to years — shaped by documents, housing, finances, or emotional readiness. Many lost long-term perspective after the political upheavals of 2020 and the pandemic:

> "*Planning collapsed. Since then, I live from one visa deadline to another*".

Yet within this discontinuity, participants articulated a slow re-tempering of belonging — what might be called *diasporic futurity*. Futures were plotted not as linear progress but as *repetitive hope*. Even when not immediately attainable, the *image of a future home* functioned as a psychic horizon — something to move toward.

This dream coexisted with a humble, everyday *practice of resilience*: morning playlists for different cities, yoga mats in rented flats, warm lamps in winter evenings. One interviewee put it simply:

> "*Freedom is chaos — unless you build the structure that shapes your day*".

These micro-temporalities align with Tolia-Kelly's (2004) concept of *re-memory*: embodied repetitions that stitch affect to material practice. In this light, Belarusian migrants demonstrate how futurity itself becomes a homing practice — an ongoing attempt to "*make the future livable*", even when the coordinates of return remain absent.

Reclaiming Temporality as Agency

Ultimately, the narratives of hope and endurance reveal that *time*, rather than space, becomes the primary terrain of belonging. To persist through delay, to imagine while waiting, is to perform what could be described as *temporal sovereignty*: reclaiming authorship over the rhythm of one's own unfolding. These migrants inhabit an expanded

field of potentiality — fragile yet generative — where belonging is composed not through possession of place but through continuity of affect.

In this sense, Belarusian exile offers a paradigmatic case for rethinking emotional geography: it exposes how *hope operates as spatial practice*, how care and imagination literally construct the coordinates of a livable world. What endures is not certainty but orientation — an embodied movement towards possible futures.

Conclusion

This study explored how Belarusian migrants and political exiles after 2020 reconfigure their sense of home, belonging, and selfhood in contexts marked by rupture, displacement, and precarity. Through a reflexive thematic analysis of thirteen in-depth interviews, it traced how *homing* emerges not as a spatial endpoint but as an affective and ethical practice — a continuous negotiation between loss and creation, memory and movement. By positioning the analysis within diaspora studies, emotional geography, and feminist phenomenology, the research advances an understanding of exile as an *emotional architecture*: a mobile infrastructure through which life becomes livable when territorial belonging is denied.

The findings reveal that neither home nor identity is fixed — both are continuously reassembled through practices of care, creativity, memory, and embodied routine — as an affective infrastructure: a foldable, mobile constellation of sensory cues, symbolic objects, and relational rituals. *Belonging* emerged not from legal status or physical presence, but through emotional investments, accumulated routines, and the courage to remain present in the face of impermanence. At the same time, many participants experienced ongoing feelings of *otherness*, intensified by social fragmentation, linguistic barriers, and the inability to access care in moments of vulnerability.

Rather than viewing mobility as purely dislocating, this study shows that it can also produce new subjectivities, temporalities, and solidarities. Participants navigated short-term planning horizons while cultivating long-term imaginaries — dreams of groundedness that coexisted with adaptive strategies for survival and expression. Emotional resilience, as expressed in this research, is not a static quality but a form of *affective labour* — sustained through mutual support, creative agency, and the maintenance of transnational connections.

These insights contribute to broader discussions in migration and diaspora scholarship by foregrounding the *emotional and relational geographies* of displacement. The Belarusian case illustrates how

individuals under political pressure respond not only with flight or nostalgia, but with innovation, resistance, and a radical reimagining of home. As this community continues to negotiate exile, their practices of homing, belonging, and becoming offer a lens into how the future is not simply awaited — but actively composed, one gesture, one room, one connection at a time.

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