

THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA

AND ITS ROLE IN SOLVING THE POLITICAL CRISIS

BY ALESIA RUDNIK

Main recommendations

- The EU and the international community should provide financial support to Belarusian diaspora initiatives within the framework of support to Belarusian civil society. Financial aid should target not only People's Embassies, but also all the active Belarusian diaspora initiatives and organizations.
- The EU should assist the Belarusian diaspora organizations in establishing and developing international infrastructure with expert technical and legal support.
- Continuing to provide political support to Belarusian democratic forces – the ecology of which includes the Belarusian diaspora – should remain a priority for 'Belarus ambassadors' in Western countries' foreign policy circles.
- A pro-active position and communication by international civil society organizations, human rights defenders, politicians, academia representatives and journalists would strengthen the diaspora's actions targeting the Belarusian autocratic regime.
- The EU should provide protection for Belarusians who work closely with democratic political initiatives and promote the Belarusian agenda on an international level.



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Introduction

The political crisis that started in Belarus in the summer of 2020 has united and politicized the Belarusian diaspora. The diaspora acts as a liaison between the Belarusian democratic forces, the European Union and Belarusian emigrants. This report describes the transformation of the Belarusian diaspora as well as its contribution to resolving the political crisis in Belarus.

What did the Belarusian diaspora look like before the political crisis of 2020?

It is rather difficult to estimate the exact number of Belarusians living abroad. However, the UN estimates it at about one and a half million.¹ Unlike the Ukrainian, Russian or Armenian diasporas, the consolidation of Belarusians in other countries was rather weak until 2020. A few representative offices functioned as informal associations and only some were officially registered. One such organization is 'Belarusians of Sweden (Sveriges Belarusier), registered in 2009.² However, the organization was exclusively concerned with the unification of Belarusians abroad, cultural events and the preservation of Belarusian heritage in Sweden.

Most of the associations of Belarusians abroad did not maintain strong ties with Belarusians within the country on political issues. Instead, these organizations' activities were largely concentrated in the cultural sphere: translating foreign books into Belarusian (for example, *Mamma Mu*³), conducting courses in the Belarusian language or organizing fashion shows with Belarusian designers. Some diaspora organizations, such as the Belarusians in Switzerland, collaborated with representatives of Belarusian embassies to arrange such cultural activities. The Belarusian Foreign

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Ministry even created a special programme called Belarusians in the World for 2016–2020, in which it provided an opportunity to join the advisory council of Belarusians abroad and financed the meetings of this council.⁴

Even when Belarusian embassies and the diaspora did not closely cooperate, they often worked in the same direction. For example, in Sweden, the initiative of the Belarusian diaspora to change the official name of Belarus from 'White Russia' (Vitryssland) to Belarus was willingly taken up by Dzmitry Mironchyk, the Belarusian Ambassador to Sweden. In 2019, with the arrival of Sweden's new Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ann Linde, the Belarusians of Sweden made another request to change the name of the country to Belarus and held a demonstration by the Swedish parliament. The long campaign was successful and at the end of 2019 – during the first visit of a Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs to Belarus in many years – Ann Linde announced the name change to Belarus.⁵ However, Swedish media also published comments by Ambassador Mironchyk and, to a lesser extent, from representatives of the diaspora, who had begun to advocate for the change in 2009. According to some sources, the ambassador had also conducted non-public negotiations with the Swedish Foreign Ministry on changing the name.

It is important to understand that before 2020, the actions of the diaspora mirrored the EU policy towards the Belarusian regime. In response to sanctions against the regime's brutality towards protesters in connection with the

1 United Nations, Population Division, "[International migrant stock 2019](#)".

2 [Sveriges Belarusier](#).

3 Jujja Wieslander, "[Mamma mu in other countries](#)".

4 Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "[O vypolnenii mero-priyatiy podprogrammy 'Belorusy v mire' Gosudarstvennoy programmy 'Kul'tura Belarusi' na 2016- 2020 gody](#)".

5 Linde, Ann, "UD byter idag benämning från Vitryssland till Belarus", *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 November 2019.

2010 election, Lukashenka had released almost all political prisoners. After that, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Belarus's most liberal ministry – intercepted the agenda and began to actively work to improve the image of the Belarusian regime abroad.⁶ Numerous cooperation programmes between the EU and officials in Minsk have contributed to duplicating a similar position in the Belarusian diaspora. Until 2020, both the diaspora and the foreign ministry offices in various countries tolerated each other and sometimes carried out joint initiatives. For instance, the Embassy of Belarus in Sweden has held receptions for Belarusians living in Stockholm on more than one occasion. However, in 2020 things changed rapidly and there was no time for solemn receptions.

Consolidation of Belarusians abroad in Response to the Political Crisis in Belarus

The appearance of unexpected presidential candidates in the Belarusian political arena in the spring of 2020 revived Belarusian society. The wave of politicization that followed the arrest of Siarhei Tsikhanouski, the nomination of his wife, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, as the second female presidential candidate in history, and the announcements of the nomination of former official Valery Tsapkala and banker Viktor Babaryka shook Belarus. Active public work, first and foremost by Babaryka's headquarters and Tsikhanouskaya's team, gave Belarusians hope that this time it would be worth going to the polling stations. The arrest of Babaryka on 18 June 2020 became a powder keg and a test of the extent to which Belarusians were willing to engage in political activity. On this day, thousands of Belarusians gathered on the streets of Minsk to protest the arrest of one of the most popular presidential candidates. The second test for Belarusians was on 14 July 2020, when Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was registered as the only opposition candidate, Tsapkala was denied registration and Siarhei

⁶ Kryvoi, Yaraslau & Wilson, Andrew, "From sanctions to summits: Belarus after the Ukraine crisis", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2015.

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Tsikhanouski and Viktor Babaryka remained in prison.

By this time, the wave of politicization had reached Belarusians abroad. In Stockholm, Belarusians held a rally outside the Belarusian embassy against the unfair refusal to register and to detain presidential candidates. Belarusian diasporas in different countries – both those with and without formal associations – united to conduct an exit poll during the upcoming presidential election. In Belarus, independent exit polls are prohibited by law, but nothing prevented Belarusians abroad from conducting an independent counting of votes in the presidential elections. So, on 9 August 2020, independent exit pollsters gathered outside the Belarusian embassies in 23 countries, collecting data and sending it to Golos, the platform for counting votes that was created in Belarus on the eve of the elections. By election day Golos had more than 1.5 million users. A million verified votes on the Golos platform revealed discrepancies with the results of the official elections.⁷ Not only Belarusians resident in the country but also the diasporas immediately reacted to the election result, which, according to multiple estimates, was a 'theft of the will' of the Belarusian people. Additional pressure abroad on the Belarusian embassies led to 'fair' protocols, where Tsikhanouskaya gained more votes than Lukashenka. To illustrate this, the Belarusian Embassy in Stockholm announced 90.3% of Belarusians voting in Stockholm had cast their vote for Tsikhanouskaya and 3.96% for Lukashenka.

Reflecting the actions of Belarusians in Belarus – who, since 9 August, had mobilized for the largest protest in the history of Belarus – Belarusian diasporas took to the streets of their cities, demanding European politicians to pay attention to the repressions that followed the opaque

⁷ Voice, "[A platform to hear every Belarusian](#)".

elections. The Swedish Foreign Minister, Ann Linde, condemned the violence and warned of the consequences for bilateral relations on 10 August 2020.⁸ On 18 August, Linde spoke with Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, who, according to independent sources, received significantly more votes than Lukashenka and was forced out of the country under threat. Sweden also offered to serve as a platform for dialogue between the regime and the opposition, to which the opposition immediately agreed while the regime remained silent.⁹ Over the next few months, Sweden – in most cases on the initiative of the Belarusian diaspora – hosted visits of six Belarusian politicians, including presidential candidate and opposition leader Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and unregistered candidate Valery Tsapkala, who became one of the so-called three graces of the Belarusian opposition along with Tsikhanouskaya and Viktor Babaryka. Thus, Sweden became the country that – on an equal footing with Poland and Lithuania – held the largest number of meetings with Belarusian democratic forces in 2020.

In parallel to this, the Belarusian diaspora became more formalized. The organization Belarusians Abroad and the 16 People's Embassies of Belarus were created on the initiative of the exiled politician and former diplomat, Pavel Latushka.¹⁰ In the countries where the people's embassies did not arise, other Belarusian diaspora organizations were registered including the large association Razam in Germany.¹¹ Likewise, a number of initiatives appeared in the Czech Republic to help Belarusians who had fled the country, and registered organizations in the Czech Republic on Belarusian topics increased.¹²

8 Regeringskansliet, "Statement by Foreign Minister Ann Linde on developments in Belarus", 10 August 2020.

9 Government Offices of Sweden, "Minister for Foreign Affairs Ann Linde in telephone conversation with Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Makei", 18 August 2020.

10 [People's Embassies of Belarus](#).

11 RAZAM, "[RAZAM introduces itself](#)".

12 Alesia Rudnik. From the interview with the leader of one of the Czech Republic's Belarus organizations.

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So, after the start of the political crisis in 2020, the Belarusian diaspora turned into a serious force of political influence across Europe in just a matter of months. In addition, after moving abroad, the Belarusian democratic forces needed expert and human resources to communicate with the international community, which the diaspora was able to assist with. Belarusians Abroad also became a major donor to solidarity funds involved in helping emigrating Belarusians and victims of the regime's repression.

It is important to understand that the Belarusian diaspora after the start of the 2020 protests is different in nature to the diaspora before these events. Previously, the diaspora was composed of communities that united Belarusians from abroad for the purposes of communication and preservation of culture. From the second half of 2020 onwards, a new diaspora has formed that is acting on the wave of politicization of the Belarusian society at large with the aim of democratization.

Soft power or the engine of the revolution?

Over the past year, the Belarusian diaspora has become not only an important resource for Belarusian opposition politicians, foreign politicians and the media, but also a force pressuring the Belarusian regime and supporting Belarusians inside the country. However, it would be an exaggeration to assert that Belarusians abroad autonomously influence the regime. The agency of the Belarusian diaspora remains closely connected with political forces, such as the National Anti-Crisis Management and the office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya.

The following examples illustrate how the Belarusian diaspora has influenced the increased pressure on the Belarusian regime. Firstly, over the past year, not only have Bela-

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Russian opposition politicians commented on the events in Belarus in foreign media, but diaspora representatives have increasingly appeared on foreign television and in print media. The media was not just interested in assessments of political processes by the Belarusians who had left the country before the crisis, but also in personal stories since many Belarusians had friends, acquaintances and sometimes relatives affected by the political repression. Those of us involved with Belarusians of Sweden have noticed this growing demand since the first months of the political crisis. The Belarusian diaspora has become a focal point for informing the outside world about Belarus through expert, activist and personal perspectives.

Secondly, throughout the past year Belarusians abroad have taken to the streets of their cities, urging society and politicians to pay attention to the events in Belarus. To attract attention at these demonstrations, the Belarusian agenda has often been expressed through a local perspective, or through messages that would be understandable to the local population. Such messages were picked up not only in the media but also in the political discourse. For instance, in Sweden one such message was “Just an hour’s flight from Stockholm”, followed by examples of the regime’s abuse. In various ways, the Belarusian diaspora has often directed and set the tone for the coverage of Belarus and the reactions of politicians abroad. The actions of the Belarusian diaspora have undoubtedly given and continue to give a signal to the Belarusian regime about the readiness to support Belarusians in their homeland, as well as to lobby for policy in the countries where they live. Of course, this has influenced the strengthening of the Belarusian diaspora’s partnerships with politicians at different levels, as well as opinion leaders and the cultural community more

widely. In Sweden, representatives of the diaspora have established close ties with political parties, public organizations, some business representatives and expert centres. Multi-sector cooperation with politicians at different levels also increases the pressure on foreign politicians, who may subsequently hasten the process of adopting sanctions against Belarusian officials or enterprises.

Thirdly, the Belarusian diaspora has played an important role in putting economic pressure on Belarusian state-owned enterprises. For example, the Belarusians of Britain have lobbied British Tobacco to refuse to cooperate with Grodno Tobacco Factory Neman, the state-owned tobacco enterprise in Belarus.¹³ The Belarusians in Sweden, through their numerous appeals and communication with the media, were able to achieve the cancellation of the loan from the Swedish Export Credit Agency (EKN) for the Belarusian enterprises Minskenergo and Brestenergo. “Based on a fresh analysis, EKN has concluded that the two projects in Belarus lack the necessary prerequisites to meet human rights requirements in compliance with international regulations”, was how EKN’s representatives described the motivation behind their decision.¹⁴

Fourthly, Belarusians abroad have supported Belarusians in the country financially and have also provided assistance to the newly emigrated Belarusians. Thus, Belarusians abroad became sponsors of Belarusian solidarity funds such as By-Sol, which, since August 2020, have paid out 3 million euros including to the repressed (1.87 million euros), factory workers (601,000 euros), and Belarusian émigrés (158,000 euros).¹⁵ For Belarusians who have emigrated as a result of the political crisis, it is enough to recall the most striking example that required advocacy work of the diaspora, close ties with officials and local stakeholders. The MEDE-

13 BAT, [”Responding to human rights allegations”](#).

14 EKN, “EKN withdraws Belarus guarantee offers”, 25 May 2021.

15 BYSOL, [”Reporting”](#).

VAC project for the rehabilitation of torture victims in the Czech Republic that has so far recovered more than 90 Belarusians who physically suffered from police violence during the protests in 2020.¹⁶

To summarize, the Belarusian diaspora has taken a wide range of actions to influence the resolution of the political crisis in Belarus. It continues to be an important resource

16 Nevedomskaya, Tatiana, "How the Czech Republic helps Belarusians affected by the Lukashenka regime", *Deutsche Welle*, 23 March 2021.

for both democratic forces and emigrating Belarusians.

However, the resources within the diaspora itself may run out. Different emotional states, fear of activism abroad, full-time work on a volunteer basis and lack of coordination with opposition political forces and between diasporas – all these factors affect the gradual depletion of resources among Belarusians abroad. These issues need to be addressed by the democratic international community in order to strengthen the diaspora.

Recommendations

1. Increase financial support for Belarusians abroad

This problem was partially addressed in a resolution of the European Parliament, which emphasized the need to support the rights and interests of Belarusians abroad, for example through funding the People's Embassies of Belarus.¹

The initiative reflects the intention to support the Belarusian diaspora. However, it represents a reactive policy that emerged only after the death of the Belarusian activist Vitaly Shyshou in Ukraine and almost a year after the beginning of the Belarusian political crisis. When adopting such resolutions, it is worth taking into account the specific juxtapositions of Belarusians abroad: old organizations that arose before the political events of 2020, People's Embassies of Belarus in 16 countries and international associations of Belarusians abroad.

1 Clause 37 notes that the EU: "Highlights the tremendous importance of the establishment of people's embassies of Belarus worldwide and urges the Commission and the Member States to provide further support to protect the rights and interests of Belarusian citizens abroad and the interests of a democratic Belarus, for example by exploring ways to fund the people's embassies of Belarus", citation from: European Parliament, "Joint Motion for a Resolution", 6 October 2021.

2. Assist in establishing infrastructure for Belarusians abroad

A significant share of the Belarusian diaspora is represented by newcomers who left Belarus as a result of the developing political crisis. Despite having emigrated, many Belarusians continue to engage in activities related to Belarus, either putting the country on the international agenda or by directly helping Belarusians who are still in the country. The emergence of new organizations working with Belarusians abroad is a continuation of the formalization and institutionalization of the Belarusian diaspora that should be supported. Belarusians abroad would benefit from additional education on how to build civil society organizations abroad, capacity building training and legal education as well as support in integrating these new organizations into the third sector's culture abroad.

3. Continue providing political support to Belarus

The Belarusian diaspora became politicized in response to the politicization of civil society in Belarus, which gave the impetus for the growth of the Belarusian diaspora abroad. Continuing to provide political support to Belarusian democratic forces, the ecology of which includes the Belarusian diaspora, should remain a priority for 'Belarus ambassadors' in the foreign policy circles of Western countries.

Whether the diaspora will remain as active with a protracted political crisis in Belarus remains an open question. However, the tendency towards institutionalization and active cooperation with the Belarusian opposition as well as local politicians may postpone the depoliticization of the Belarusian diaspora. Lastly, close cooperation with the Belarusian diaspora challenges the legitimacy of Belarusian embassies abroad, which sends a strong signal to the regime in Belarus.

4. Finding new ways of cooperating with the diaspora

Stakeholders in Western countries should engage with the Belarusian diaspora to verify information, take common advocacy initiatives on Belarus or even on economic issues such as sanctions lists or secondary sanctions. With limited resources within the diaspora and a lack of close partners, the diaspora spends enormous resources on gaining attention to its initiatives. Taking more proactive positions and communicating with civil society organizations, human

rights defenders, politicians, academia representatives and journalists would strengthen the diaspora's actions targeting the Belarusian autocratic regime. Briefings with Belarusian diaspora leaders held by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs representatives every six months is one example of such a cooperation that would increase the understanding of the domestic situation in Belarus and increase the effectiveness of Western countries' foreign policy.

5. Provide protection for Belarusians abroad

The EU should provide protection for Belarusians who work closely with democratic political initiatives and who promote Belarus on the international level. The death of a Belarusian in Ukraine, the hijacking of the Ryanair plane with famous journalist and blogger, Raman Pratasevich, onboard, and numerous reports on active Belarusians in Lithuania and Poland being watched or followed should spur EU countries to action to increase the protection of Belarusian activists residing abroad.

This brief is part of the series "How to Build a Democracy", which aims to create understanding about reforms within the context of the Belarusian democratization process.

The first report in this series, "How to Break Lukashenka" by Anders Åslund, can be found [here](#).