

Belarusians of the world: “In solidarity we trust”

On 15 – 16 July 2017, Minsk hosted the VII Congress of the Belarusians of the World, gathering over 300 participants. This year’s event was remarkably diverse, featuring Belarusian foreign minister [Uladzimir Makei](#) and even the former detainees in [the White Legion case](#).

Belarusian Foreign Ministry started displaying interest to the diaspora Belarusians relatively recently. It still struggles to find effective tools to engage the diaspora, as the latter remains critical and distrustful towards the official political regime.

At the same time, young generation of Belarusian expats appears to be emerging as a new dynamic force, extensively using social networks to improve communication and organisation. In March 2017, diaspora activists from all over the world launched a solidarity campaign BY_Help in response to the state brutality during peaceful spring demonstrations.

One third of the nation residing abroad



The congress of the world’s Belarusians takes place every four years, concentrating on the current issues of relations between Belarus and its diaspora. The organiser, the World Association of Belarusians Baćkaŭščyna (Homeland), has been maintaining contacts to the Belarusian diaspora since 1990 and

serves as a roof organisation for the Belarusians abroad.

According to Baćkaŭščyna's most recent estimates, around 3.5 million Belarusians reside in 73 different countries. Obtaining more accurate numbers is not possible, as [not every migrant chooses to inform](#) Belarusian authorities of his or her decision to leave. Moreover, registration at Belarusian embassies and consulates abroad is voluntary and does not offer any perks for those who take the time to do so. This results in inaccurate official statistics, [misrepresenting the actual numbers](#) of Belarusians abroad.

For instance, according to Belstat, 1,046 persons emigrated to Canada during 2000 – 2010. However, available Canadian statistics for the same period indicate the higher number of about 5,700 persons, with an average of 500 Belarusians emigrating to Canada annually.

Many Belarusians who move abroad and obtain the citizenship from another state often choose the option of keeping their Belarusian passports if possible. However, they are motivated by the ease of travelling and visiting their relatives back in Belarus rather than by patriotic feelings.

According to the president of "Baćkaŭščyna" [Alena Makoŭskaja](#), weak feelings of national identity along with a lack of sentiments towards the homeland lead to quick assimilation of Belarusians permanently residing abroad. For instance, the number of people identifying as Belarusians in Russia went down from 1.2 million to 0.5 million just over the recent two decades.

Recruiting diaspora as a

partner: Makei vs Canadian Belarusians



In 2014, the Law On Belarusians Living Abroad came into effect, yet so far it [failed to offer any incentives](#) to Belarusians living abroad, similar to those introduced in Poland within the framework of [Pole's Card](#) program.

Belarus recognises neither dual citizenship nor foreign education credentials, thus discouraging many Belarusian emigrants and Western-educated Belarusians to return and contribute to the economy at home.

Since 2016, the Belarusian state started another round of review of its relationship with diaspora, wishing to appropriate the latter's potential to serve as a soft power tool in the foreign policy. Acknowledging diversity of opinions existing about current political regime, Belarusian foreign minister Uladzimir Makei appealed in his speech at the Congress to unity of all Belarusians, pointing out external and internal challenges to the independence of the state.

Makei's appearance was overshadowed by an unpleasant incident on the eve of the Congress. The archbishop of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and the member of the Council of the World Association of Belarusians Sviataslau Lohin was denied entry to Belarus at the border crossing in Homel region. Apparently, the local border guards have not yet been informed of the new priorities in foreign policy, as the very next day a call from the Belarusian Foreign Ministry was enough to solve the issue, allowing the archbishop to continue his journey.

Not everyone at the Congress was convinced by the new conciliatory tone of the foreign minister. Valiancina Šaučenka, representing Belarusian Canadian Alliance, noted the continuous marginalisation of the Belarusian language and a lack of democratic reforms. Canadian Belarusians refused to maintain any contacts to the state institutions, declaring their support to civil society initiatives and those working towards democratic changes in Belarus.

BY_Help solidarity campaign

The potential of diaspora solidarity with the regime's opponents came to the foreground during spring 2017, when the state cracked down against the peaceful demonstrations. BY_Help was born on 15 March, following the brutal detentions after the "March of Non-Parasites" and grew into full-scale solidarity campaign after the crackdown on 25 March.

BY_Help activists collected \$ 55,000 in donations from Belarusians all over the world to support the arrested protesters and their families, provide legal assistance, and help in paying the fines imposed by the Belarusian courts for the detained as well as for independent journalists, who covered the protests and suffered from persecution.

Apart from its initial goals, BY_Help campaign also demonstrated that Belarusian diaspora is quickly outgrowing the outdated ways of communication and organisation. As Kryscina Šyjanok who administers the Facebook group for Belarusians in the Czech Republic, pointed out, the new generation of Belarusian expats prefers to stay in touch through social networks, which open up new ways to engage larger groups of Belarusians or people of Belarusian origins residing abroad.

Social networks help to create more inclusive environment for communication and organisation of activities, so that even

those who did not show permanent interest to their former homeland, feel more confident to join and contribute. Finally, openness contributes to cultural exchange and dialogue, presenting Belarus to the world not as the notorious “last dictatorship” but through its people.

Beyond fostering informal contacts, the new generation of Belarusian diaspora uses its expertise to demystify Belarus. The Ostrogorski Centre is the first think-tank uniting professionals and academics of Belarusian origins, who were trained at Western universities. Its projects, including Belarus Digest, focus on promoting better understanding of Belarus. Starting from 2016, the Centre organises [Ostrogorski Forum](#) – an annual conference on foreign policy and security, aiming to bring together independent and pro-government analysts and experts.

However, Belarusian authorities still lack a comprehensive program outlining the long-term strategy of relationship with its diaspora. In order to establish an effective connection, the state should start taking diaspora Belarusians seriously and offer them more serious incentives than cooperation in cultural projects.