Belarusian MFA and the diaspora: a complicated relationship

Speaking at a meeting of the Consultative Council for Belarusians Living Abroad on 5 September in Minsk, Belarus's foreign minister Vladimir Makei sought support from the Belarusian diaspora in preserving the country's “independence, sovereignty and statehood”.

This is a recent and noteworthy trend. Earlier, the government's interaction with Belarusians living abroad remained limited to cultural events or using some of them as the regime's advocates.

Since recently, the Belarusian authorities have become aware of the role the diaspora can play in promoting the country’s political and economic interests abroad. However, the government’s politically motivated selectivity in choosing its partners and a lack of money to support their ties with Belarus jeopardise this cooperation.

Few incentives to remain Belarusian

Different estimates put the number of people of Belarusian descent outside Belarus between 2.5 and 3 million people.

Some of these are autochthonous Belarusians living in neighbouring countries. A significant number of Belarusians migrated to former Soviet republics during Soviet times. Many people ended up in Western countries as a result of several waves of political or economic emigration.
The World Association of Belarusians "Baćkaŭščyna", established in 1990, unites 135 organisations of the Belarusian diaspora from 28 countries. Baćkaŭščyna holds congresses of Belarusians every four years.

Leaders of the Belarusian diaspora, supported by Baćkaŭščyna, for many years sought the adoption of legislation codifying its relationship with the mother country and establishing efficient mechanisms of support.

However, the Law on Belarusians Living Abroad, which came into effect in September 2014, did not live up to their expectations. The law failed to introduce any formal recognition of their status by the Belarusian state. The Belarusians living abroad receive no preferential treatment or incentive when they repatriate or travel to Belarus, study or invest in the country.

Besides, the Belarusian government has no legal and scarce financial resources to support diaspora organisations in their countries of residence. The foreign ministry has been looking – sometimes successfully – for local sponsors to provide such support.

Nor is it prestigious to be a Belarusian, especially in the Western world. The international reputation of Alexander Lukashenka’s regime may cast a shadow on persons belonging to the nation.

All these factors do nothing to stop the negative trend of accelerated mass assimilation of Belarusians outside their home country.

In Poland, where several experts estimate the number of ethnic Belarusians at the end of the 20th century to be 200–250 thousand people, only 47 thousand persons identified themselves as such in the 2011 census. In Russia, the number of self-identified Belarusians dropped from 810 thousand in 2002 to 520 thousand in 2010. In the United States, most
children and grand-children of Belarusian emigrants do not speak Belarusian and fail to participate in activities of Belarusian associations.

Talking to carefully selected activists

The foreign ministry, now the main point of contact in Belarus for the diaspora, held the second meeting of the Consultative Council for Belarusians Living Abroad on 5 September in Minsk.

The ministry timed the meeting to coincide with celebrations of the Belarusian Written Language Day held in Rahachou on 4 September. All Council members from nineteen countries were brought to this small town in eastern Belarus 200 km from Minsk.

The composition of the Council, established in September 2014, raises many questions. While it includes members from 19 countries, some (i.e. Moldova) are clearly over-represented and some (i.e. Poland) are underrepresented. The Belarusian community in the United Kingdom has a church, a major Belarusian library and several organisations in London but no representation in the Council.

Several associations of Belarusians operate in the United States with their own community centres, churches, libraries and periodicals. However, the Belarusian foreign ministry has
chosen a certain Peter Zharkov, the president of the Association of Russian (sic!) WWII veterans in Minneapolis, to be its interlocutor on the affairs of Belarusian Americans.

To date, Zharkov’s most notable contribution to the Belarusian cause may be his participation in the All Belarusian People’s Assembly in June 2016, where he praised Lukashenka’s “strong and constructive statement”. It would be a challenge to find a single word written in Belarusian on Peter’s Facebook page.

Speaking to Belarus Digest, Dmitry Mironchik, the foreign ministry’s spokesman, stressed that the Consultative Council was never meant to be a representative body. The foreign ministry sees it as a mere “working tool to interact with the diaspora”.

The Council currently includes people whose candidatures were submitted by Belarusian embassies. One can assume that Belarus’s foreign missions tend to recommend such people who are not averse to the Belarusian authorities’ domestic and foreign policy.

For many years, post-war emigrants from Belarus to the United States remained the most vocal advocates of the country's independence and democratic future in the free world. However, as Dr Jan Zaprudnik, a recognised leader of the Belarusian diaspora in the United States, confirmed to Belarus Digest, Belarusian diplomats have failed to invite people from this community to join the Consultative Council.
Seeking the diaspora’s help in preserving independence

Vladimir Makei’s address to the second meeting of the Consultative Council represented a hodgepodge of policy statements and a Soviet-style activity report. The latter included a detailed account of various events held with the government’s assistance and participation, such as concerts, summer schools or celebrations.

The most important policy statement became the foreign minister’s appeal to the Council’s members “to do everything possible to preserve our country, so that it retains its independence, sovereignty and statehood”. He called it “our common [country]" and “most important task”.

Earlier incessant promotion of the “Union State of Belarus and Russia” and post-Soviet integration may have disoriented many members of the Council, especially those living in Russia and other CIS countries. Some of them sympathise with Putin’s “Russian world” concept. The minister may have wanted to remind such Belarusians that their true loyalty should belong to their mother country.

Makei spoke about the ministry’s intention to work together with the World Association of Belarusians "Baćkaŭščyna" to prepare the next Congress of Belarusians of the World.

While Baćkaŭščyna and the congresses never entered open and direct opposition to Lukashenka’s regime, their relationship always remained quite cold and mostly working-level. The ministry seems to be determined to reverse this trend. It has been working on some undisclosed “important decisions" of revolutionary nature to be announced on or before the next Congress in 2017 in Minsk.

Vladimir Makei also called for a stronger involvement of the
Belarusian diaspora in the development of trade relations between their countries of residence and Belarus. However, the decision to hold a business forum for Belarusians living abroad adopted at the 1st meeting of the Consultative Council in July 2015 has yet to be implemented.

The foreign ministry seems to have a genuine interest in establishing a more productive framework for relations with the Belarusian diaspora. However, its efforts will bear fruit only when the government begins to invest more energy in strengthening Belarusian national identity at home.

The government should choose its partners among the diaspora on the basis of their competency and their loyalty to the Belarusian nation and not to those in power. The authorities should also put in place and finance specific mechanisms of support and engagement such as a Belarusian's Card (modelled after a similar Polish document), which could help the diaspora strengthen their ties with Belarus.