Belarusians in Poland: Living Together but Separately

On 12 August Polish hooligans attacked Belarusian journalists and activists in Warsaw. Although such incidents are rare, old stereotypes and prejudices often make life for Belarusians in Poland difficult. Such stereotypes also provoke anti-Belarusian acts of vandalism. Although Poland guarantees the Belarusian minority certain rights, in reality they face various obstacles to retain their identity.

Problems with the Belarusian minority begin with simply determining their numbers. Official statistics estimates the minority at 47,000 people, but Belarusian activists think that the real number is a few times higher. The national census taken in 2011 arouses controversy over the real number of the Belarusian minority. In fact, it does not provide reliable data.

According to Belarusian activists the real number of the Belarusians may even be as high as 200,000–250,000 people. Nevertheless, in comparison to the previous census results, the recent statistics reveal some decrease in the number of people who declare their identity as Belarusian – in 2002 there were 48,700 such people.

A few factors are responsible for such discrepancies. Some Belarusians do not feel comfortable speaking openly about their national identity. On the other hand, the incidents that took part in the context of the last national census proved ignorance and insensitivity to the issue. Some of the census takers ignored the affirmations regarding the declarations of Belarusian nationality by the people in the Podlaskie Voivodeship. In other cases they considered Polish citizenship to automatically mean being a Polish national and ignored
declarations of Belarusian identity.

Going to the Elections

Members of the Belarusian minority do not have guaranteed representation in the Polish parliament, unlike the German minority. Belarusians have not yet constituted a political party which could represent exclusively its interests. But they have established electoral committees on a temporary basis in the past. In most cases Belarusian activists run on the electoral lists of other political parties, mainly the leftist parties. Today Eugeniusz Czykwin is the only representative of that minority in the lower chamber of the Polish parliament.

The situation seems different at the level of municipalities, where in minority representatives participate actively. In some municipalities in north-eastern Poland the Belarusian population constitutes a majority. In Czyże and Dubicze Cerkiewne over 80 per cent of the population are Belarusian, in Hajnowka, Orla over 60 per cent. These numbers make Belarusian representatives in the local self-governance structures substantial.

Teach Me in Belarusian!

Because of the inevitable assimilation process, Belarusian language teaching remains a priority for local activists. According to statistics, around 3,500 students learn Belarusian in 44 institutions within the state educational system in the Podlaskie Voivodeship. It includes 2-3 hours of class, available from kindergarten through primary schools up to secondary school.

Belarusian activists insist that the number of classes is insufficient. Moreover, the very education of language should shift more into the realms of teaching Belarusian history and culture. It could more effectively strengthen Belarusian identity among people. Another issue is to improve the
attitude of Poles to the Belarusian minority. Thus, early education aimed at schoolchildren's education on national identity and culture might be one solution.

A number of organisations in Poland work to strengthen Belarusian national identity through popularising the Belarusian language and culture. The Kupalle festival of Belarusian culture, the Basovishcha Music Festival of Young Belarus and numerous other events attract not only local Belarusians but also Poles and guests from Belarus.

Many of these initiatives lack adequate financial support. The Basovishcha is festival widely known in Belarus and attended by the best Belarusian rock bands. However, it struggled to find enough money this year and many thought it would not happen. Whereas it is popular for some Polish politicians to praise values of the multinational environment, funding of such initiatives remains rather modest and insufficient.

Protecting Belarusian Identity

Negative stereotypes still determine the way many Poles perceive the Belarusian minority. Most of the prejudices are tied to perceptions regarding religion. Since a majority of Belarusians belong to the Orthodox Church, some of their Polish fellow citizens often perceive them as "strangers".

It is surprising because Belarusians are a traditional and historical minority in the eastern part of Poland. Nevertheless, in most cases, Polish people do not really know about Belarusians and it is the mass media which provides Poles with such an image of them. Since it can influence mutual Belarusian-Polish perceptions, it would seem particularly helpful to overcome such negative stereotypes.

In an effort to meet the minority expectations, Polish legislation from 2005 gave the right to use Belarusian language as an additional language in the places where Belarusian minority constitutes at least 20% of whole
population. Since 2007 the local authorities have introduced it in a few communities, for example in the Hajnowka and Orla municipalities.

Moreover, the Belarusian minority has a right to secure bilingual place names where there is a substantial number of Belarusians. In 2011, in the region of Orla the local authorities erected the first such signs. However, they did not withstand the test of time and in May 2012, hooligans destroyed them.

Hooligan acts can take place at any time. The vast majority of xenophobic crime is committed by people who do not even know Belarusians, a target of their aggression. Proper education on national and cultural diversity will help them understand that being a Polish national does not necessarily mean being a Pole and such unpleasant incidents should become a thing of the past.