

World Congress of Belarusians Discuss Challenges to Belarusian Identity

On 23-24 July Belarusian emigrants from 21 countries participated in the two-day Congress of Belarusians of the World in Minsk.

It was a rare occasion where top state and churches officials as well as opposition politicians attended the same event. Organisers of the Congress managed not only to gather people with different worldviews and political affiliations, but also representatives of the old and new wave of emigration.

Assimilation, the popularity of the Card of the Pole, and easier access to Russian citizenship remain the most serious challenges for Belarusians no matter where they live. The congress presented an opportunity to present initiatives – from mobile phone applications to serious academic journals. More importantly, it was an opportunity to see what problems Belarusians are facing abroad.

Belarusians of the World

Although today over 3.5 million Belarusians live outside Belarus, this year event attracted significantly less Belarusians than 20 years ago. The First Congress of Belarusians of the World took place in 1993 and has been held every four years since then. Around a thousand Belarusian emigrants came to the then nearly independent Belarus.

This time over 300 representatives of the communities stretching from North America to Russia's Siberia took part in the Congress. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the organisers of the first congress. This year Barys Sviatlou

from the Ministry of Culture represented the state authorities.

Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan host the largest Belarusian communities outside of Belarus. A historical Belarusian minority lives also in Podlasie, a region on the Poland-Belarus borderland. The participants of the Congress noticed, however, a drop in the number of people self-identifying as Belarusians. Concrete figures suggest that this is happening in Poland and also in Russia.

Challenges to Belarusian Identity

In the words of Alena Makouskaya, one of the organisers of the 6th Congress, the assimilation of Belarusians abroad poses a threat to both Belarusian society and its diaspora. The relatively small number of young Belarusians that participated in the Congress may be a sign of the ongoing assimilation of Belarusian youth abroad.

Another challenge, according to Makouskaya, is the Card of the Pole ("Karta Paliaka"). This document allows people from Belarus (and other post-Soviet republics) who claim Polish roots to apply for additional rights in Poland. The Card of the Pole simplifies travel, education and work in a neighbouring Poland. Provisions still attract many Belarusians to apply, however, many have spoken out about the harmful effect for Belarusian society in the long-term that this Polish policy can cause. Since its introduction in 2007, around 42 thousand Belarusians have received the Card, as data from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows.

[Work migration](#) remains another challenge for today's Belarus. Due to the economic situation, more and more Belarusians have decided to leave the country and search for better job opportunities abroad. Since it has no visa requirements, [Moscow attracts lots of Belarusians](#). The Russian parliament is considering the simplification of obtaining

Russian citizenship for its compatriots abroad. In terms of demography, it may also be a blow to Belarusian society.

It seems that the problems of Belarusians in Belarus and abroad remain more or less the same. The diaspora sees no assistance from the state when it comes to financing community centres or supporting cultural events or the promotion of the Belarusian language, whose usage is shrinking even within the country.

Until now the state authorities have failed to adopt a law regulating relations with the Belarusian diaspora. Such a law exists already in the neighbouring Poland and Russia. The World Association of Belarusians "Bačkauščyna" over the last decade has been encouraging the authorities to draft such a law.

The Minister of Culture, Barys Sviatlou, confirmed at the Congress that the authorities together with diaspora representatives have already prepared a law and should introduce it soon. In his words, a new project would help the state to develop the positive relations with Belarusian living abroad and programmes supporting their cultural activities. But in practice, not much is being done.

Nearly all major organisations of Belarusians in Western Europe and North America are critical of the political regime of Alexander Lukashenka

The authorities refrain from giving additional rights to Belarusians living abroad because they feel that the Belarusian diaspora from the West could engage in activities which they would consider unfavourable. Indeed, nearly all major organisations of Belarusians in Western Europe and North America are critical of the political regime of Alexander Lukashenka, his treatment of political prisoners and Belarusian culture. They are proud of the [white-red-white flag](#) and trace the Belarusian statehood back to the times of the [Grand Duchy of Lithuania](#) and the [Belarusian People's](#)

[Republic](#) rather than from Soviet time.

Some Russia-based organisations, however, support the current Belarusian regime. One Moscow-based Belarusian finished his speech by banishing a Soviet flag saying that most people at the Congress were also citizens of the Union State of Belarus and Russia.

The delegates of the Congress called on Belarusian authorities to release political prisoners in a collective statement entitled "On an Act of Good Will" adopted at the Congress. A group of delegates, mainly from Ukraine and Russia argued that it was an internal affair Belarus. The issue caused a heated debate, but only eight people supported the removal of the statement from the Congress' agenda.

Promoting Belarusian Culture

Language has traditionally been the core identity ingredient of the Belarusian diaspora. However, the number of Belarusian-speaking people in Belarus has been decreasing annually by 10-15 per cent over the past years. This means that fewer and fewer emigres speak Belarusian. Most of the speeches at the Congress were in Belarusian and many spoke up in favor of the need to protect and promote Belarusian culture and language.

The event gave a chance to present projects and initiatives that help to lessen the level of alienation among Belarusians abroad but also in Belarus from Belarusian culture. One of them, a mobile phone application "Belarus Land" promotes the most interesting places to visit in Belarus. Another application "ABC Belarus: Native Alphabet" (in Belarusian "Bukvar: Belaruskaja Azbuka") helps children to learn Belarusian alphabet in an amusing way.

A representative from Bialystok, Poland presented an online project, kamunikat.org, which offers access to Belarusian literature and press in electronic versions free of

charge. Belarusians from the United Kingdom presented [The Journal of Belarusian Studies](#), an academic journal revived after a 25-year break in London. Even Belarusian official television [reported](#) on the Journal and the congress during prime time.

The congress presented a unique meeting point – the speakers included high level officials and opposition politicians, pro-government delegates and those who do not recognise the Belarusian authorities as legitimate. They all agreed that diaspora could play an important role for Belarus. However, without significant political changes in Belarus, the Belarusian diaspora will have to continue survive on its own, without much help from the Belarusian state.

Fine for Foreign Aid, Ecotourism, Official Blacklist – Civil Society Digest

Some 300 delegates gathered in Minsk for the Sixth Congress of Belarusians of the World. Fond of Ideas explains why business should be socially responsible.

New opportunities for environmental education await Belarusians. Among them, BEROC invites young Belarusians to participate in a student's school on the economy and economic research.

The state-run newspaper "Respublika" published a list of extremist publications and events that endanger the Belarusian

state.

Civil Society Events

[Belarusian expatriates holding congress in Minsk](#). Some 300 delegates gathered in Minsk for [the Sixth Congress of Belarusians of the World](#) that held on July 23-24, in Minsk. Organised by the Batskaushchyna World Association of Belarusians, the event was attended by expatriates living in 20 countries. The Congress focused on the state of the Belarusian people amid globalisation. [Elena Makouskaya re-elected](#) head of the organisation.

[New concept paper on transportation](#). Belarusian Union of Transport (BUT) made the first practical steps towards the formation of the modern Belarusian legislation in the area of transportation. The BUT experts have prepared a concept paper on the development of an integrated mobility based on the harmonization of the legislation of Belarus and the European Union. This paper is the result of a cooperation between BUT and the Office for a Democratic Belarus (ODB) and, later on, with the Office of the European Expertise and Communications.

[34mag launches "Bicycle" project](#). An interactive map for cyclists for all of Belarus answers questions such as where it's possible to rent a bike, repair it, etc. The project aims to collect all bicycle related spots in one place and thus to make Belarus a truly bike-friendly country. "Bicycle" is an interactive map, so it provides the ability to add valuable points to all users.

[Infographic from AMPby](#). Alternative Youth Platform has developed an infographic called "Belarusian youth in numbers" dedicated to Youth Day, which is celebrated annually on 30 June. In particular, about 2,300,000 Belarusians are in the age range of 14-31; 2,829 long-distance trains are needed if all the young people want to leave Belarus; 11,455 isolation rooms in the detention facility Akrestino are needed to put

all youth to prison.

[Let's Make it Better!](#) On 16 July representatives of 15 NGOs from Minsk, Gomel, Vitebsk, and other cities came together in Minsk to discuss ideas they want to implement within the "Let's Make it Better!" campaign aimed to increase the role and impact of social activities in Belarus. The campaign's initiator is the Executive Bureau of the Assembly of NGOs. The majority of the local campaigns of the Let's "Make it Better!" campaign are to be held in August-September 2013.

[Belarusian poems in trolleybuses](#). Belarusian poems have been placed in 90 trolleys in Mogilev. The project will last until the end of the year, while Mogilev has the status of the cultural capital of Belarus and the CIS. The organisers managed to implement the project which was one of the winners of [the project fair](#), held by the campaign "Budzma!" and Mogilev city executive committee.

Education, seminars

["Educational Breakfast" launched a series of business breakfasts](#). On 16 July Fond of Ideas held its first business breakfast within a series «Food for ideas». The general theme of the breakfasts is the development of the culture of internal and external corporate responsibility among Belarusian business circles. The first business breakfasts covered the issues of training a company's own employees. Participants of the business breakfasts were managers and top managers of large Belarusian companies.

[BEROC Student School](#). Belarusian Economic Research and Education Center (BEROC) in co-operation with the British Embassy in Belarus calls for students to participate in the 3rd Student School on a modern economy and economic research. The School will be held in Minsk on Saturdays, from 14 September 14 to 21 December 2013. The working language is English; participation is free.

[Roundtable on certification in non-formal education](#). [BEL.BIZ](#) held a round-table “Non-formal education: certificates and certification,” which covered the issues of certification for non-formal trainings. The event was attended by experts of commercial and non-profit service providers, including IPM, Marketing.by, MTBank, the Association for Life Long Education, etc. The round-table became the first event to precede the Global Entrepreneurship Week in Belarus, which will take place from 18-24 November.

[Roadmap for joining the Bologna Process](#). On 17 July in Minsk, a group of Belarusian experts and civil society activists called the Public Bologna Committee unveiled a roadmap for joining the Bologna Process, which is aimed at creating a European Higher Education Area. [The White Book](#) contains a series of amendments to Belarus’ Education Code that would supposedly bring Belarus closer to the principles and values of the Bologna Process.

Green Events

[Trainings on eco-tourism strategic planning](#). On 23-31 July the USAID LEED Project implemented by UNDP conducts four training sessions to improve the skills of local partners. These partners are located in the seventeen tourism destinations within Hrodna and Brest regions (representatives of community-based organizations, local authorities, and business) and will focus on the development of ecotourism strategies.

[School of Environmental Activism](#). On 8-14 July the second stage of the School of Environmental Activism took place in the Astravets district of the Hrodna region. The participants learned about environmental initiatives in Belarus, listened to foreign experts, took part in workshops. The School is being implemented by the Green Alliance and designed to prepare people ready for action and self-organisation, able to fight for the preservation of wetlands and parks, and to promote environmentally friendly lifestyle.

[GEF Small Grants Programme](#) invites civil society organisations to take part in the project “Strengthening environmental governance through the development of non-governmental organisations.” The project is aimed at promoting sustainable development and improving the environment on the basis of more effective CSO participation in environmental governance. The maximum project amount shall not exceed 50,000 USD. Application deadline is 11 August 2013.

[Consultations with civil society](#). The UN Human Rights Council Special Rapporteur on Belarus, Miklos Haraszti, held a number of consultations with representatives of Belarusian civil society. The consultations took place on 11-14 July in Vilnius, as Haraszti did not get an invitation from official Minsk that would allow him to visit Belarus.

Interaction between State and Civil Society

[Official blacklist](#). Belarusian state-run newspaper “Respublika” published an updated “National list of extremist materials” which contains “Belarus Press Photo 2011” album and a number of CDs, books and publications, for example, the documentary “A Lesson in the Belarusian language” and the concert “Solidarity with Belarus” in Warsaw (2006).

[Cancelled sealing house in Uruchcha to be built](#). Minsk City Council reversed its previous decision that it made last year to cancel the construction of one of the houses on Shugaeva street in the Minsk district of Uruchcha. The initiative “European Perspective” is trying to look into the situation and help citizens to protect their rights. Meanwhile the locals [recorded a video appeal](#) to Lukashenka.

[Fine for getting foreign aid](#). On 12 June Tatjana Zialko, chairman of the initiative of Belarusian pensioners “Our Generation” was fined for getting foreign aid with the aim of “regime change”. In March 2013, she was detained with about 1,500 euro while leaving the Slovak Embassy in Minsk.

[Iryna Halip vacated](#). On 19 July Minsk Partizan District Court has vacated the journalist's sentence for taking part in 19 December 2010 'mass riots' in Minsk. Iryna Halip, journalist of Novaya Gazeta, ex-presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau's wife, had lived under constant police supervision since 3 May 2011.

Belarus Digest prepared this overview on the basis of materials provided by Pact. This digest attempts to give a richer picture of the recent political and civil society events in Belarus. It often goes beyond the hot stories already available in English-language media.