

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.

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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.