The Old Belarusian Diaspora and New Political Exiles: How Do They Differ?

After the brutal repression of the regime that followed the Presidential election in 2010, many opposition activists moved to the West. New emigration centres, poorly connected with the old diaspora, mushroomed in Europe and the United States.

The new wave of emigration differs significantly from their predecessors when it comes to financial resources and attitudes towards politics. The West should be careful with the political ambitions of emigrants and focus on achievable results. Instead of hoping to quickly overthrow Lukashenka, it should consider realistic opportunities to improve the situation in Belarus step-by-step.

European Belarus is Dividing in the Exile

On 7 October, the leader of the European Belarus civil campaign and former presidential candidate Andrei Sannikau stated that “Zmitser Barodka is not a coordinator of European Belarus any more due to a loss of confidence”.

Zmitser Barodka was one of the key activists of the European Belarus civil campaign, who as several other prominent figures from this organisation ended up in exile after the latest presidential elections in Belarus. Sannikau's statement resulted from Barodka's refusal to transfer leadership to the emigrant umbrella organisation Belarusian House in Warsaw to Sannikau's team.

The Belarusian House is an actual house in a prime location in Warsaw near the Polish Parliament. Zmitser Barodka was not the only head of the House. Ales Zarembuk, close to the For
Freedom Movement and the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, remains the House's co-director and tries to maintain his distance from these kinds of problems.

According to Barodka, Andrej Sannikau's team asked him to pass two organisations registered in Poland – European Belarus and Belarusian House – over to them, placing them under their control. Barodka agreed to transfer control over European Belarus, but refused to give up Belarusian House.

The Belarusian mass media did not write about it, but a week after Sannikau`s statement Barodka ceased to be a co-director of the Belarusian House in Warsaw. Uladz Kobets, another Andrej Sannikau co-worker, got this position.

**New Centres of a Belarusian Political Struggle: Real and Fictitious**

The Belarusian House in Warsaw is more than an expatriate political organisation. This House became the largest association of new emigrants, and therefore attracts far more attention.

At the same time a number of similar offices have emerged in various Western countries. Some of them exist primarily on paper, other conduct specific types of activities. In total, more than ten such initiatives have arisen in recent years.

1. Belarusian House in Warsaw (Poland)

2. Civil and political representation of Belarus in Lithuania (Lithuania)

3. Free Belarus Now (UK)

4. Belarusians in exile (USA)

5. Belarusian Tribunal (Netherlands)

6. Belarusian Center in Ukraine (Ukraine)
While in most European countries a number of old Belarusian organisations operate such as the Association of Belarusians in Great Britain established in 1946, the new emigration has decided to create its own structures. This at times caused misunderstandings between the old and new wave of the emigre community.

The Public Association of Belarusians in the Czech Republic Pahonia called last year's establishment of the Belarusian House in Prague a performance directed by former presidential candidate Ales Mikhalevich. Many from the old emigration accuse the new emigration of being too politicised and too financially dependent on Western donors.

Differences in their approaches of **how to democratise Belarus** has also split organisations working abroad. Last year Brussels-based Office for Democratic Belarus (ODB) made a statement about the need to soften EU sanctions. In response, nearly ten emigre organisations publically condemned the statement and called the West to increase pressure on Belarus.

**Need to Learn Lessons of the Previous Generations**

According to the former presidential candidate and current political exile Ales Mikhalevich it is impossible to be a politician in exile. But for some, political conflicts in exile serve as a substitute for domestic politics in Belarus. On the other hand, political emigres do a good job by keeping Belarus on the agenda of foreign governments and raise the
level of interest in Belarus among Europeans and Americans.

Old diaspora organisations, such as the Belarusian-American Association or Association of Belarusians in Great Britain, provide good examples for the new emigration. They maintain traditions, based on the Belarusian language and values of independence and democracy, which they value higher than short-term political manoeuvring. The old diaspora often has its own property and income which allows them to support projects in Belarus, such as publishing books on Belarusian history, academic journals and scholarships for Belarusian students.

To reduce internal conflicts, the new emigration should adopt the good practises of the old wave. It may consider focusing more on cultural and educational issues, developing others' knowledge of their homeland and support publishing about Belarus. These would make a real, albeit slow, impact on the development of Belarus.

Zianon Pazniak, a political refugee and leader of the main democratic movements of the 90s, is very much involved in these issues and pays special attention to them. He remains the only Belarusian politician whose public meetings in exile gather crowds of people.

The West should also be careful with the political ambitions of emigrants. Unfortunately, the longer they stay outside of Belarus the more distant they become from the problems of ordinary Belarusians. Supporting projects that have real outcomes inside Belarus should remain a priority.