

POLICY BRIEF

BELARUS DIASPORA OLD AND NEW: CURRENT STATE AND CHALLENGES

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CONTRIBUTORS:

OXFORD BELARUS OBSERVATORY: The Oxford Belarus Observatory (OBO) seeks to raise awareness and knowledge of contemporary issues and challenges facing Belarus today, including those related to the specifics of the COVID-19 pandemic and its enduring consequences. Most specifically, employing the insights unique to Area Studies, OBO will support and promote evidence-based policymaking, knowledge brokering and stakeholder interaction through:

- the comprehensive and rigorous analysis of the impact of and responses to COVID-19 in Belarus;
- the analysis of social, economic, political, cultural and historical issues which shape contemporary Belarus and which can inform external understanding;
- engagement, wherever possible, with domestic stakeholders;
- the production of timely and reliable evidence in response to both real domestic policy needs but also external stakeholder initiatives; and
- the communication of evidence in ways that are useful to, and usable by, policy-makers, national and international civil society, the media and other non-academic stakeholders.

OST RESEARCH CENTRE: OST Research Centre is a department of the **OFFICE OF SVIATLANA TSIKHANOUSKAYA (OST)**. The OST is a democratic representative body of the Belarusian people aiming to achieve a national dialogue, ensure a peaceful transfer of power, and hold new democratic elections. The Office promotes and advocates for democratic changes in Belarus. OST Research Centre conducts a range of analytical activities, including expert discussions, research on the Belarusian agenda, and data analysis.

IGSD, UNIVERSITY OF WARWICK: Institute for Global Sustainable Development (IGSD) is a world-leading research institute with a focus on resilience and sustainable governance. IGSD supports the work of OBO by providing expertise, networks and advocacy for this initiative. It also complements the OBO expertise through its own projects which focus on **Resilience in Ukraine** from a comparative perspective (2022-23); the **GCRF COMPASS+** project on Central Eurasia (2022-23), the EU Horizon project **SHAPEDEM** focusing on the eastern neighbourhood and Belarus in particular (2022-25), and DFF **AGMOW** project (SDU, 2023-26) focusing on Russia. IGSD has expertise from life science, humanities and social sciences and champions transdisciplinary research for transformative change.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the current issues and major challenges faced by the Belarusian diaspora, and is structured around three themes. The first theme provides an overview of the state of the Belarusian diaspora, including its historical background and contemporary developments. The second theme centres around the profile and main characteristics of the Belarusian diaspora. This section also covers its connection to the country of origin. The third theme discusses the role played by the Belarusian diaspora in supporting the vision for a democratic Belarus. The brief concludes with three policy recommendations.

BACKGROUND

Belarus' events of 2020 mobilised and reinvigorated the Belarusian diaspora as a force d'être. According to some estimates, over 1.5 million Belarusians live abroad, and the events of 2020 had a significant influence on the development of their global agency. The start of the presidential election in 2020, and the repressions and violence that followed, turned Belarusians living abroad into a real political force in Europe and beyond. This was further reinforced by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the waves of displacement of both Belarusians and Ukrainians which followed. The Belarusian diaspora rose to prominence once more to protest against Russia's aggression, express solidarity with Ukraine, and show that ordinary Belarusians do not support the actions of Lukashenka's regime. While consolidation is afoot, there are also many challenges facing the Belarusian diaspora in the context of the ongoing war and Lukashenka's continuing persecution of free Belarusians.

What are the current challenges and opportunities for the Belarusian diaspora? How connected are Belarusian diaspora communities in different countries? What can Belarusian communities abroad do to support the vision for a democratic Belarus? What kind of support does the Belarusian diaspora need from the international community? How can diaspora reach out to the domestic audience? These and other questions were discussed at the expert webinar jointly convened by the Research Centre of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya Office (OST Research Centre), the Oxford Belarus Observatory and IGSD University of Warwick (Institute for Global Sustainable Development). The present policy brief is based on this event, which was moderated by [Katsiaryna Lozka](#), Research Fellow at the Oxford Belarus Observatory and the speakers of the event included [Kristina Rikhter](#), Legal Advisor, Office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya; [Tatsiana Kulakevich](#), Research Fellow at the Institute for Russian, European and Eurasian Studies and Assistant Professor, University of South Florida; [Živilė Dambrauskaitė](#), Visiting Researcher, Eastern European Studies Center (EESC) and [Hennadz Korshunau](#), Senior Researcher at the Center for New Ideas.

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ANALYSIS OF THE ISSUE

Even though many Belarusians immigrated abroad previously and were part of various associations and communities, the Belarusian diaspora historically has not been as visible, consolidated, and politically active as it is today. Recent events in Belarus, along with Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, have transformed the Belarusian diaspora from an inward-looking community into a more outward-looking one, increasingly engaging with Belarusian, European, and international affairs. In addition, it should be noted that since 2020, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have had to flee the country and the size of the diaspora has increased.¹

Since 2020, the Belarusian diaspora has gained prominence as an influential player on both the Belarusian and international arenas, being bolstered by its increase in size to over 1.5 million people residing abroad. The Belarusian diaspora continues to exert pressure on the Lukashenka regime by openly revealing its crimes and shaping global public opinion. Simultaneously, the diaspora communities seek to wield influence over European and international decision-makers and to shape the policies regarding their homeland by advocating for a range of measures aimed at holding the regime accountable for human rights abuses and electoral fraud, targeting officials with sanctions, and calling for further de-legitimization of the Lukashenka regime.

In the wake of the 2020 events in Belarus, self-organisation has emerged as a defining feature of the Belarusian diaspora. Facing repression, a number of initiatives had to move abroad. Seeking to reclaim their voice, Belarusians have further established People's Embassies of Belarus in several countries². At the same time, the Belarusian diaspora faces many challenges along with the significant experience it has gained during the process. This experience is likely to prove valuable in a post-authoritarian Belarus, providing lessons on the establishment and maintenance of civil society institutions and democratic practices.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Belarus: Crackdown on rights forcing citizens to flee says UN expert, The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 26 October 2022, [READ HERE](#)
2. For more information, please see: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

BELARUSIAN DIASPORA: FROM HISTORY TO MODERN TIMES

The Belarusian diaspora has a rich and enduring history of political activism, which includes fighting for the country's independence and awareness-raising during the Soviet era, and the efforts in the aftermath of

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The Belarusian diaspora has a rich and enduring history of political activism, which includes fighting for the country's independence and awareness-raising during the Soviet era, and the efforts in the aftermath of World War II to change the name of Belarus from "White Russia."¹ In the 1950-1970s, various organisations, such as the Belarusian American Women's Association and a Belarusian Bank², emerged, though many of these initiatives eventually faded away.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the activities of the Belarusian diaspora temporarily subsided as some believed that their main goal - the country's independence - had been achieved. Despite a temporary decrease in activism, the Belarusians abroad continued to maintain connections worldwide, even before the advent of the internet and social networks. These networks were mainly established through "Bačkaŭščyna," the World Association of Belarusians. Between 1993 and 2017, ten Congresses of Belarusians of the World were held.³

The authoritarian turn of Lukashenka's regime in the mid-1990s reignited the diaspora's activism, leading to renewed efforts to advocate for democracy and human rights in Belarus. In this context, the surge of political activism among the Belarusian diaspora after 2020 was not sudden but built upon previous efforts. For instance, the adoption of the 2020 Belarus Democracy Act in the US⁴ proceeded much faster due to previous efforts by Belarusians in America and earlier campaigns related to the 2004 Democracy Act.⁵

Today's Belarusian diaspora is a diverse community, consisting of multiple waves of emigration for different reasons. Some members left as early as the 1990s or even before, while others represent more recent emigration. Since 2020, reportedly, hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have had to flee the country due to the Lukashenka regime's crackdown on peaceful protests and civil society organisations⁶. As such, the diaspora characteristics vary from country to country. For instance, neighbouring countries, such as Poland, Lithuania, or Ukraine, have a larger population of Belarusians, potentially resulting in a different dynamic of activism and links between members of the diaspora.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Kipel, Vitaut, *Belarusians in the US [Belarusy USA]*, 2 ed., Knihazbor, 2017.
2. Kipel, Vitaut, *Belarusians in the US [Belarusy USA]*, 2 ed., Knihazbor, 2017.
3. For more information, please see the official website of the Association: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
4. H.R.8438 - Belarus Democracy, Human Rights, and Sovereignty Act of 2020, US Congress, [READ HERE](#)
5. H.R.854 - Belarus Democracy Act of 2004, US Congress, [READ HERE](#)
6. "Belarus: Crackdown on rights forcing citizens to flee says UN expert", The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 26 October 2022, [READ HERE](#)

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SOCIAL LANDSCAPE OF THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA¹

What are the specifics of the Belarusian diaspora today? In October 2022, Narodny Opros (National Poll) and the Center for New Ideas conducted a survey of Belarusians abroad in order to get a better understanding of the profile of the Belarusian diaspora and connections within and between different diaspora communities. Based on 1,631 responses, the findings provide a number of insights into the sociological portrait of the contemporary diaspora movement of Belarus.

First, the Belarusian diaspora mainly comprises young, highly educated individuals with good income. The majority, about three-quarters, are under 40 years old, with 85% holding bachelor's degrees, and some even holding PhD/Master's degrees.²

Second, location-wise, there have been a number of changes in recent years. The "older" diaspora is dispersed across Europe, the US, and Russia. Following the crackdown on peaceful protests in 2020, for many Belarusians fleeing the regime, Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania became the primary destinations. The start of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine in 2022 had a significant impact on the Belarusian emigrants as a considerable number of them resided in Ukraine. Many people had to change their place of residence again and moved to Poland, Georgia, Lithuania, or Germany.

Third, the sociological survey reveals that the primary motivation behind emigration is not financial in nature.³ Safety concerns rank as the topmost reason, followed by the pursuit of a better future due to the absence of prospects in Belarus. Financial considerations are placed only in the third position on the list of reasons for emigration. The unprecedented scale of participation in the 2020 protests in Belarus has resulted in many people feeling afraid and anxious about their safety. Thus, according to another survey by the Center for New Ideas, nearly all people who participated in the 2020 protests or supported them in different ways (e.g. through social media) have experienced a sense of trauma.⁴

Despite this, repatriation is firmly on the agenda of the Belarusian diaspora communities. 40% wish to return after the regime falls, a quarter wish to settle, and the remainder are not sure. It appears the Lukashenka factor and uncertainty emerge as two fundamental factors that shape the space preferences of the Belarusian diaspora. At the same time, 70% of those who want to return, plan to be very active in Belarus' recovery when Lukashenka's regime falls.

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. This section is based on the sociological study, conducted by Hennadz Korshunau. It was published in January 2023 by the Center for New Ideas. The full study (in Russian and English) can be found at: [VISIT WEBSITE](#)

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2. Data collection was done via the CAWI method, 1267 people were questioned in this survey.
3. However, this conclusion is questioned in the recent study on migration to Lithuania produced by Andrei Kazakevich, link to the study available here: : [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
4. "Collective trauma of the Belarusian society: the scale and ways to overcome", Center for New Ideas, 16 December 2022, [READ HERE](#)

THE ROLE OF BELARUSIAN DIASPORA AND MAIN CHALLENGES

The diaspora communities play an important role in supporting the vision of a democratic Belarus. They do so by informing communities within their countries of residence about the situation in Belarus. In addition, they also carry out civil actions and campaigns to bring attention to issues that Belarusians are facing. There are fundraising initiatives and campaigns aimed to help Belarusians who were repressed by the regime, or those who had to flee the war in Ukraine as well as Belarusian military units who fight on the side of Ukraine.

Despite this strong potential, there appears to be a discrepancy between how the Belarusian diaspora perceives its role and how it is perceived by those still living in Belarus. The latter tend to have higher expectations and hopes for the diaspora compared to how the diaspora sees itself. Many people from the diaspora maintain solid connections to their homeland. According to another survey, around 70% of Belarusians in Lithuania know of diaspora organisations. And one-third of them engage either by volunteering or by donating. For context, on average, only about 5% of people engage with diaspora initiatives.¹

In this context, it is important to note that Belarusian diaspora communities often face difficulties during the adaptation process in host countries as they strive to maintain their identity, language, and history. Host countries can play a crucial role in supporting the legalisation of Belarusian migrants, ensuring access to the labour market, education, and also medical care. Problems relating to these matters occur in every country and have worsened since the outbreak of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine due to the regime's co-aggression in it. Recognising the importance of these challenges, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe is in the process of preparing a report on the migration of Belarusians, and their challenges abroad.²

LINKS AND INFORMATION

1. Mentioned in Živilė Dambrauskaitė's presentation in the webinar. For the full-text of the study, [VISIT WEBSITE](#)
2. The release day of the report with specific recommendations is scheduled for October 2023.

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CONCLUSIONS

The Belarusian diaspora has become more visible since 2020, as its activities gained a new momentum. The situation, however, became more complicated when Russia launched its fully-fledged invasion of Ukraine. The Belarusian diaspora had to work hard to assert a distinction between the Belarusian people and the Lukashenka regime. Not only has Lukashenka's support for Russia's war put the country's safety and status into jeopardy, it has also compromised the diaspora's standing in their host countries.

Despite these challenges, the Belarusian diaspora communities continue to maintain strong links with their homeland and show solidarity with Ukraine through various means, such as volunteering at the border, fundraising, and joining demonstrations worldwide. As a result, despite facing several challenges, the Belarusian diaspora –old and new– remain active, agile, and responsive. However, they face certain challenges and host countries must support the diaspora and their struggle for a free and democratic Belarus, in all possible ways. Three policy recommendations should be highlighted in this respect.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1** Host countries should support Belarusian migrants and facilitate their integration. One way to achieve this is through offering practical measures such as providing language courses, better information on healthcare, education, and taxation issues, and legal consultations for diaspora entrepreneurs.
- 2** It is vital for host countries to facilitate the integration of both "old" and "new" diaspora, not just migrants and refugees from a more recent wave, and to preserve and empower their national identity, culture, and language. While Belarusian language and traditions remain under repression inside Belarus, the international community and individual countries can help draw attention to these developments and support the diaspora in resisting these types of oppression.
- 3** It is important to provide further support to Belarusian diaspora entrepreneurs. The need for legal consultations, such as starting a new business, self-employment, and workplace regulations, stands out. Such initiatives may become a valuable asset for post-authoritarian Belarus that will face several challenges on the way to democratic transition.

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