

## MINSK FORUM XIX: MINUTES OF THE MAIN THESES

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# BY – 30 Years of Independence

History, Civil Society, Culture,  
Business and Foreign Policy

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WARSAW



## 2021 MIGRATION CRISIS AND CHALLENGES FOR THE DIASPORA

As moderator **Aliaksej Burnosenka** (TEDx) clarified, the discussion concerns migration of Belarusians themselves, not those who appeared on the Belarusian-Polish border in the second half of 2021.

**Karalina Liudamira Sauka** (Centre for Social and Economic Research CASE Belarus) pointed out that Belarusians use various forms of legal stay in Poland, but there is an increase in applications everywhere. Thus, in 2020 there was a rise in applications for a residence permit, and an even greater increase should be expected in 2021. The number of Belarusian citizens who applied for international protection in Poland increased tenfold: if in the period 2015-2019 the number of such people fluctuated around 40, in 2020 it was 407, and in 7 months of 2021 - already 904.

**Ales Zarembiuk** (head of the Belarusian House in Warsaw) specifies that these numbers are not so big, because most Belarusians legalize in Poland using other documents (based on studies or work, or the Pole's Card). Moreover, until the spring of 2021 many of political emigrants believed that they would be able to return to Belarus soon after the victory, and they started actively applying for political asylum only after the forced landing of the Ryanair plane in Minsk.

Zarembiuk also quoted Polish President Andrzej Duda as saying at the UN General Assembly: there are more than 150,000 Belarusians in Poland, and Poland will be their home for as long as necessary. Poland has issued 598,000 visas and 50,000 residence permits - more than all EU countries put together.

Speaking about the reasons for migration, **Karalina Liudamira Sauka** cites the data of the CASE Belarus survey (she emphasizes that this is an unrepresentative survey: those who left after the elections were motivated by the political situation and the risk of criminal persecution, while those who left earlier were motivated by professional fulfilment and personal reasons. The statistics on Belarusian students abroad is also revealing: while Russia used to be the main destination, its share has been falling over the past 10 years, while the share of Belarusian students in Poland has been growing steadily; in the 2019-20 academic year, the balance has almost equalized.

**Andrei Vardomacki** (professor at the University of Warsaw) agrees with her, citing economics and politics as macro causes of migration. As for the direction of migration, Vardomacki emphasizes that Belarusian protesters „do not have a geopolitical component in their consciousness,“ they are neither pro-Western, nor pro-Russian. At the same time, although the majority of Belarusians more often prefer rap-

prochement with Russia than with the EU (if it is necessary to choose one of the two options), they generally support friendship and cooperation rather than membership in the Russian Federation. The Belarusians have a similar attitude to Poland.

Among the factors for choosing Poland, **Karalina Liudamira Sauka** names the difference in economy and salaries, hidden unemployment in Belarus, loss of attractiveness of Russia as a destination for migration from Belarus, problems with civil and political rights in Belarus, as well as the possibility to get the Pole's Card.

Although migrants in Poland note difficulties in finding work in their field, health care and finding accommodation, for those who are already employed, the situation looks good. More than 40% work in IT and digital sector, 10% are entrepreneurs and freelancers. At the same time, 65% have a position that matches their qualifications and 17% subjectively think that their position is even higher. At the same time, 65% want to return to Belarus after the change in the political situation and the release of political prisoners.

Such a high share of the IT sector among those employed can be explained by the data cited by **Ales Zarembiuk**: about 10% of the Belarusian IT sector moved to Poland after August 2020. Strategically, this is a threat to Belarus, as the regime is pushing out the most qualified personnel, including doctors. The process of nostrification of diplomas in Polish medicine has already been simplified, but further discussions with the government and parliament are needed to amend the legislation and simplify procedures for requalification and validation of not only higher education, but also vocational secondary education.

In general, there are plenty of jobs in Poland, but one has to learn the language and compare the level of qualifications required by the labour market in Belarus and Poland. At first, many have to take unskilled jobs: Ales recalls how he worked in construction after his emigration to Poland in 2010. Now there are no obstacles to this, because in December 2020 Poland changed its legislation, so people with humanitarian visa can now work legally.

However, migrants can also count on assistance, which more than 5,000 Belarusians have already received from the Belarusian House: counselling, assistance with humanitarian visas, psychological and financial assistance, Polish language courses, medical and rehabilitation assistance. About 11 million zlotys have been spent on all this: both from the Polish budget and from crowdfunding donations, which demonstrate the solidarity of an already entrenched diaspora.

**Maria Maroz**, head of the “Country to live in” foundation, draws attention to the role of self-organization and solidarity of Belarusians, who help each other to cope with the difficulties of unplanned emigration. Such self-organization takes place both in Telegram chats and in the form of foundations, which deal with social support faster and better than the government. The “Country to live in” foundati-

on, in particular, helps families of political prisoners with children on a monthly basis in this way. Maria calls this foundation „a bridge between the diaspora and the people inside the country“. In addition to collecting donations from diasporas, the fund also offers diasporas from different countries projects that they can implement at home.

## PANEL DISCUSSION 2

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# EDUCATION: A NON-POLITICAL ENDEAVOUR WITH POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

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**Tatiana Shchytsova**, representative for education and science at the office of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, doctor of philosophy, professor at the European Humanities University (Vilnius), considers her main task to be promoting the development of consolidated opinions and policy documents on behalf of the expert community in education (as opposed to the situation of disparate experts and platforms, with different language and different discourse). Among the strategic objectives, in addition to preparing educational reforms, is helping school teachers to learn English in order to ensure the future internationalisation of education and, eventually, the internationalisation of Belarusian science.

At the same time, in the short term, the immediate challenge is to help expelled students and teachers who have lost the opportunity to teach, so that they can accordingly continue their education and remain in the profession. Although many have already benefited from the support of existing educational programmes (such as the Kalinowski and EU scholarship programmes), many academics still remain without support – for example, because it is difficult to provide documentary evidence of repression and/or participation in protests.

**Pavel Barkouski**, PhD in philosophy, associate professor, an independent researcher, notes that although in the „student case“ accused were accused of coordinating the protests, in fact everything was organised spontaneously, centrally, horizontally. Pavel estimates the average age of the teachers involved as 35-50, they were mainly active in the universities of the capital, although Polatsk University was also active.

Among the forms of protest were student marches, chains of students and teachers, various actions inside universities (songs, posters, stickers on the walls, sit-ins, seating students in white-red-white clothing in rows). There were isolated strikes in September and October 2020, and there were those who advocated dialogue with the authorities and participated in meetings with the university administration and Natalia Kachanava. However, Pavel does not expect the academic community to be a driver of change.

**Andrei Laurukhin**, an expert on education, science and innovation, points out that the position of vice-rector for educational work in Belarusian universities is increasingly occupied by people from the security services. The status of teachers is also being devalued, as they make up to half of the election commissions that falsified the elections. This had prompted slogans at protests such as „we don't need your diplomas“.

What students need is foreign diplomas; Andrei points out that since August 2020 (according to inaccurate statistics) more than 5,000 students have left Belarus to study, and half of them is rather unrelated to politics. As for the political ones, their applications for scholarships are often difficult to validate, as the political motivation for expulsions is covered up by formal reasons and academic failures.

**Marek Gołkowski** from the office of the Konstanty Kalinowski Scholarship Programme is sure that these difficulties are surmountable: „We will not ask the KGB for confirmation of repression against those fleeing to Poland. Even students' accounts of their experiences of violence and torture were difficult for Polish academics to endure. In a move to help the victims, Polish universities even agreed to accept those who could not provide school documents (due to difficulties in obtaining a Belarusian apostille).

According to Marek, the Kalinowski programme, established in 2006, used to admit several dozens of people per year, with a total of about a thousand by 2020. But after the events in Belarus, it got a new impetus, with 724 applications in 2020 alone, and another 430 in the incomplete year 2021.

## MEDIA: RELOCATED JOURNALISM

The panel moderator **Zmicer Lukashuk**, editor of Euroradio, started the discussion with a reminder that his media was already in exile, and in general „journalists had no illusions how the Belarusian regime might behave“. And now there are no independent media offices left in Belarus.

**Aliaksandra Pushkina**, chief director of Zerkalo.io / TUT.by recalls that TUT.by continued working in Belarus until 18 May, and there was no desire to leave: „it seemed important to us to cover the situation from inside the country“. After the editorial office was smashed and the management was arrested, there was no organized relocation: everyone left where and how they could. After six months of being abroad, journalists have resolved everyday issues, and the editorial staff still works from different countries - „wherever is more psychologically and financially comfortable“.

Although the editorial office could not support the relocation financially (TUT.by accounts were blocked), the staff members in different countries were helped to obtain residence permits. They were given instructions on where and when to go in order not to distract them from their work. The editorial board continues to focus on political neutrality: „we have been working above the fray for 20 years“, „it is in the interest of our readers that we ask critical questions of either side“.

Belsat TV channel, where **Ihar Kuley** is the head of the news department, was more prepared for such a situation: „the head of our media was always abroad“ and there could be no situation when everyone was detained and there was no one to make decisions. The relocation of Belsat journalists was more centralized and „no colleague was left behind: all who wanted could move and continue working“. Although Belsat's editorial office is in Warsaw, journalists also moved to Lithuania, Georgia and Ukraine.

Those who cannot leave for personal reasons stayed to work in Belarus, but for the sake of safety they no longer go to shoot, they also had to give up street surveys. On 15 November 2020, journalists Katsiaryna Andreeva and Darya Chultsova were detained after the streaming from the Square of Changes, but the Belsat studio in Minsk continued to work until it was smashed in May 2021. However, the channel is used to repressions. „Belsat's history started with the authorities fighting with our viewers,“ Ihar reminds; at that time they removed satellite dishes from the buildings.

**Pavel Sviardlou**, chief editor of Euroradio, also points out that their head office has been in Warsaw for 15 years. Looking at what was happening to their colleagues, Euroradio did not wait for the management to be arrested and the studio to be smashed up, and left without any particular trigger. Some employees cannot leave due to their circumstances, but at the same time it allows them to get information from Belarus.

Pavel agrees that it is important for journalists to be in opposition to everyone, above the fray: „We must not fight, although they are fighting with us“. However, the position of the authorities has become rare on Euroradio: „If we are pushed out by the authorities so that we cannot take comments from them and go to their press-conferences, ok, we won't“. Instead, it is important for Euroradio to inspire people if they see fit to intervene in the situation the media are describing. However, the repression has now shifted from the media directly to readers (they are charged with reposting „extremist“ media messages).

**Aliaksandr Starykevich**, chief editor of Gazetaby.com and deputy chairman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, relocated with his colleagues in the second half of summer 2021, when repression was already in full swing - „so as not to live in anticipation of imprisonment,“ where you can lose touch with reality even faster than you can abroad. The relocation was organised, although it was up to everyone to decide where to go, but in the end it all went fairly quickly and painlessly: the website ran smoothly, there was no less content, and the audience did not notice the relocation of the editors.

And although the website has been blocked since election day, Gazetaby.com's regular audience has hardly diminished. Editorial policy has not changed in hard times: „There is no contradiction in being on the side of the good - and criticising the opposition when they do stupid things.“

## CURRENT DEVELOPMENTS WITHIN THE GROWING BELARUSIAN DIASPORA

**Palina Brodik**, coordinator of the centre „Free Belarus“ (Kiev) notes that about 2,500 Belarusians received temporary residence permits in Ukraine, about 700 received permanent residence permits, while only a few applied for refugee status. The diasporas provide refugees with psychological and medical assistance, as well as education and housing, but at the same time, the Belarusians who have left have brought positive energy and potential to the diaspora.

Palina sees her main goal as the development of civil society, which is now abroad, but will be able to return later and use this experience in Belarus: „We should make the best out of the move. It is an ideal time to learn from the mistakes and useful experiences of neighbouring countries“.

Although born and raised in Germany, **Alexander Moiseenko**, together with his emigrant parents, is now part of RAZAM e.V., the first organisation of the Belarusian diaspora in Germany, which appeared in 2020. Among their priorities are helping 45 Belarusian refugees in Ukraine with housing costs, and 30 political prisoners with financing their shopping in the prison shop. Also, in front of the Belarusian embassy in Berlin there is an „alternative embassy“, where posters and white-red-white symbols are displayed and one can sign various appeals.

At the same time Alexander points out that many volunteers are emotionally burned out, and if they are willing to help, they do not know what areas this help is needed in.

**Alexander Lapko**, executive director of the Belarusian Youth Hub (Warsaw), believes that although there are many Belarusians in Poland, including those who study here or have lived in the status of a national minority for a long time, the Belarusian diaspora is just emerging. He suggests that in the future a dozen of organisations dealing with Belarus in different cities of Poland in one way or another could organise the Association of Belarusian organisations.

Alexander points out that earlier the Belarusians were dissolving in the culturally close Polish society, it was not prestigious to remain Belarusians. And since 2020 this has changed, and people, on the contrary, are keen to prove that they are „worthy sons of Belarus“.

**Aliaksandr Milinkevich**, head of the Belarusian Free University believes that the word „diaspora“ is not very appropriate for the Belarusians in 2021, because usually the diaspora has no plans to return, while here the majority hopes for it.

He also notes the enormous image capital when those who were abroad „suddenly felt proud that we are Belarusians“. He sees the task of the diaspora in creating a positive atmosphere for those who have protested and are now in a decadent mood. To do this, it is important not to dwell on Lukashenka and the sanctions, but to form an image of the future.

**Ales Zarembyuk**, head of the Belarusian Home Foundation, recalls setting it up 10 years ago together with a small group of political migrants. And while previously they focused on information campaigns and training for various groups, since 2020 their experience and reputation have come in handy for helping refugees. Now Belarusian Home helps both with humanitarian visas and with solving everyday issues in Poland (finding accommodation, kindergarten and school). Polish language courses are in particular demand.

As for cooperation of diasporas and their future, **Alexander Lapko** recalls the conference of diasporas held in Vilnius at the initiative of Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya and the Second Congress of the Belarusians of the world held later. **Palina Brodik** points out that expectations are inflated: everyone wants everything to be good and fast, but the diaspora cannot become perfect in a year. It takes time to build interaction and trust. **Ales Zarembyuk** also draws attention to examples of how representatives of the regime are trying to divide the diaspora, as well as to the creation of diaspora organisations, which he suspects of being run by the Kremlin. On the other hand, all this only proves that the Belarusian diaspora has become an influential force that can finance itself and will not depend on a round of warming between the West and the regime in Minsk.