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BELARUSIANS ABROAD: THEIR IMPACT ON BELARUS'S IMAGE

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SUMMARY

The image of any country in the public consciousness of neighboring states is shaped by various factors. Not least among them is the diaspora: people living abroad have the ability to influence the perception of their home country through day-to-day communication, cultural or political events, and official statements. In the case of Belarus, where society is clearly opposed to the authoritarian rule of Aliaksandr Lukashenka, the role of the diaspora in shaping the image of Belarus on the international stage is particularly important. Thanks largely to the efforts of the diaspora (politicians, experts, activists), there is an understanding in international policy circles that “Belarusians cannot be equated with Lukashenka.”

This raises the question: how exactly are Belarusians abroad and the Belarusian diaspora influencing Belarus’s image in the countries where they live? How can Belarus’s image be shaped? Whose task should it be to do this?

To answer these and other questions, the Center for New Ideas has conducted a series of in-depth interviews with Belarusian activists in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia.

In countries where the “new” Belarusian diaspora has settled, there does not exist a unified, generalized image or subject such as “Belarus” in the information sphere.

In Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, there are at least three distinct yet interrelated narrative constructs relating to Belarus that have their own content, origins, and trajectories. These narrative constructs pertain to the following Belarusian subjects:

- Belarus as a state and as the Lukashenka regime;
- Belarusian society and the diaspora as its active part;
- Belarusians as individuals and representatives of their people and nation.

IMAGES OF BELARUS

Images of Belarus vary from country to country, influenced by salient themes contained within specific narrative constructs and collective memory regarding different historical periods.

For instance, in Georgia, one abstract and stereotypical image of Belarus has roots going back decades. This image depicts a “universal welfare state” featuring working factories, cleanliness, and overall order — ideals that are especially cherished by the older generation. In a sense, this image is a product of Lukashenka’s propaganda and the pro-Russian position of the ruling party; it is disseminated by the state media and reinforced by personal experiences from Soviet times.

“ *[In Georgia] ... People understand very little about Belarus, but the youth and the older generations have very different perceptions.*

Georgia-Poland, male respondent younger than 30

Among young Georgians, whose values are more liberal, people have more knowledge about the Belarusian protests of 2020: about the reasons behind them and how the government represses society. Because of this, young Georgians have more sympathy for the Belarusians fighting against dictatorship. People coming from Abkhazia or South Ossetia, which are under Russian occupation, have the greatest amount of sympathy towards Belarus — they see certain parallels between the situation in their homeland and Belarus.

“ *The older, post-Soviet generation has its own, positive image of Belarusians based on personal experiences and connections. There is also a more opposition-oriented image among more liberal young people who barely know Russian. They know about the repressions [in Belarus], about the fight for democratic values.*

Georgia, male respondent aged 30-50 years

In Poland, representations of Belarus are more starkly defined: on the one hand, there is Lukashenka and the Belarusian government, and on the other are ordinary people and Belarusian society. Belarus is perceived to be a country in the thrall of dictatorship that is fighting against it. Important factors that have contributed to positive attitudes towards Belarusian protesters include the numerous family ties of Poles to Belarus (both now and going back generations), as well as historical parallels that Poles see with the Solidarity era and contemporary processes at work in Belarus.

“ *In [Polish] academia, people are very fond of Belarusians, since Poles have had similar experiences. They remember that we have a shared history. They may not know the specific details about what’s happening in Belarus with political prisoners or about the repressive laws being passed, but in general they have positive attitudes towards Belarusians.*

Poland, male respondent younger than 30

It is probably worth mentioning the positive image of Belarusian NGOs in the Polish non-profit sector. This attitude was facilitated by the enthusiastic and effective work of Belarusian organizations in setting up processes to help Ukrainian immigrants in 2022, when Belarusians generously shared their wealth of experience in order to help victims and evacuees.

” *Polish attitudes towards our NGOs as professional organizations have even improved. Before it was more like ‘we’ll show you how it’s done.’ And when they saw how we work with volunteers, even without a common language or documents (and we did a lot of work at train stations, borders, distribution points) they were really surprised. Poles were amazed. They respect us more now.*

Poland, male respondent between 30 and 50

The country where representations of Belarus are most problematic, especially lately, is Lithuania. Accusations that Belarusians adhere to “radical Litvinist ideas” are spreading in the public consciousness in Lithuania due to speeches of right-wing politicians (according to respondents). So far, such accusations are generalized and impersonal, directed more often against the Belarusian diaspora as a whole.

” *When the campaign against Litvinism began, things started to change, people got scared. They’re a small nation, they’re afraid we’ll take Vilnius. Propaganda has a significant influence on this.*

Lithuania, male respondent over 50

” *Lithuanians are very wary of Litvinist ideas, even if only about 10 people are really pushing them. Belarusians themselves aren’t saying anything about [Litvinism] at all.*

Lithuania-Poland, Respondent younger than 30

This new domestic-policy-oriented view of Belarusians as a threat has all but undermined representations of Belarus as a country where society is being repressed, as well as the image of a Belarusian society fighting against the repressive Lukashenka regime.

” *Another image is associated with the events of 2020–2021. Whether a holistic image was formed then is a big question. Then there was the influence of nostalgia for their own dream, their fight for freedom. But this image faded pretty quickly.*

Lithuania, male respondent between 30 and 50

Accusations are not yet being leveled at individual people. Belarusians, both as individuals and as representatives of the Belarusian nation, enjoy a reputation as hard-working, responsible, disciplined people. In general, on an everyday basis, attitudes towards Belarusians may be better than towards other Slavic diaspora communities (such as Russians or Ukrainians).

Representations of Belarus in all three countries have the following two features in common:

- a fairly abstract understanding of the level of repression in the country (in extreme cases: “things have calmed down in Belarus” or “it’s not possible to repress people for likes, you’re exaggerating”);
- a positive attitude towards Belarusians at the interpersonal level (in school, at work, in personal relations).

NOTABLE TRENDS

In terms of the impact of recent significant events on representations of Belarusians in Poland, Lithuania, and Georgia, the following is clear:

- first, the events of 2022 have largely eclipsed the impact of 2020;
- second, the impact of 2022 is beginning to subside in favor of future events.

In each country, these processes are taking place in their own way, with their own implications.

Most likely, Poland is the country where Belarus’s complicity with the Russian aggression against Ukraine has had the smallest effect on its image. Due to the considerable visibility of the Belarusian agenda in the Polish public consciousness (the forced landing of the Ryanair plane, the migration crisis on the eastern borders of Poland, repressions against the Polish minority in Belarus, etc.), and Belarusian society’s opposition to the Lukashenka regime, images of Belarus have barely changed.

” *The image of the country has barely changed, with the exception of several details. Belarus’s image was good and pretty much remains so. Besides, Belarusians and Poles helped Ukrainians.*

Poland, female respondent younger than 30

In Georgia, images of Belarus have also changed only slightly — besides a small emotional outburst in 2022, the “national factor” in people’s everyday assessments has disappeared. Now, thanks to the increased attention to Ukrainians (largely positive) and Russians (largely negative), representations of Belarusians have changed indirectly, in a mediated way, vis-a-vis their relations to others — through isolation from Russians and through help to Ukrainians and Ukraine.

” *In 2022 everything changed. Belarus became an aggressor country, people were demanding to know ‘Why aren’t you protesting?...’ Now there is no negativity, nationality doesn’t play such a significant role. Only if it’s Russians.*

Georgia-Poland, female respondent younger than 30

In the case of Lithuania, images of Belarus that took shape in 2020 and 2022 have largely disappeared into oblivion. According to respondents:

“...at first we were heroes, then victims — but after 2022 we became co-aggressors. And now we have become a burden, worry, and threat.

Lithuania-Poland, female respondent younger than 30

Importantly, one of the main factors shaping representations of Belarus in Lithuania is the scale of the Belarusian migration and its imagined “radical Litvinism.” Topics such as the migrant crisis on the Belarusian-Lithuanian border and the role of the Lukashenka regime in current processes have mostly disappeared from the agenda.

Another notable factor that complicates the Lithuanian case is the historical-political component, according to which Belarusian history only begins a little more than 100 years ago. This view underlies perceptions of Belarus as a state and of Belarusians as a nation. Extreme variations of this idea entail a negation of the existence of both: Belarus as an independent state due to its subordination to Russia, and Belarusians as a nation through their total Russification and loss of national identity.

“Belarus is an unknown, and it is not the most understandable country for them, it is unclear whether we exist outside the context of Russia... (Belarusians are) a kind of amorphous mass — who apparently never fought against them. And the joint state? (meaning the Grand Duchy of Lithuania) This is out of the question. Belarusians can be tolerated if Lithuanians are the older brother. They are not very interesting, but they can be tolerated.

Lithuania, male respondent between 30 and 50

In other words, whereas in Poland the events that unfolded in Belarus in 2020-2021 and later evoke comparisons to Solidarity and sympathy for those fighting a repressive system, in Lithuania comparisons are not made with Sąjūdis, but rather with the events of January 1991. While Poles understand the full gravity of Belarusians’ struggle against their hostile government, Lithuanians will state that Belarusians were not able to achieve victory in just a few days.

CHANNELS OF INFLUENCE

Based on our analysis of respondents' answers, it can be assumed that there are three main channels through which images of Belarus are shaped.

- trends in local information spaces;
- past (or familial) experiences or contacts with Belarusians;
- events organized by the Belarusian diaspora (various entities).

In terms of the information space, which comprises both state and independent media outlets, it's worth remembering that the topic of Belarus is far from a top priority. Although there are exceptions, these are rare, and they are often eclipsed by subsequent news items.

Currently, the only country where the "Belarusian question" receives media attention at the highest level is Lithuania (see our discussion of "Litvinism" above).

“*At the moment, Belarusians are mentioned very often in the Lithuanian media. But the articles aren't so much against Lukashenka — although he's often mentioned too — but rather about how two people got in a fight at a bar, one of which was a Belarusian who shouted something against Lithuania. The activities of the Seimas and Parliament, which are against Belarusians, are also covered.*

Lithuania-Poland, female respondent younger than 30

In Georgia, on the one hand Belarusian issues are not high on the agenda. On the other, the pro-Russian position of the ruling party is still felt, which has resulted in limitations on contacts between government bodies and Belarusian NGOs.

“*...but there are nuances. We still work with oppositional parties and NGOs. And the Georgian authorities are uncomfortable with this.*

Georgia, male respondent aged 30-50 years

In Poland, while Belarus-related issues are not being pushed actively, there is still momentum from last year's information campaigns, which highlighted the positive prospects of "high-quality" intellectual and labor migration from Belarus.

“*Poles compared the young, engaged, well-educated wave of Belarusian migration to Ukrainians from the Donbass after 2014 — and such comparisons worked in our favor. They said that our IT people would pay taxes. Poles were perhaps skeptical about us at first, but the highly-qualified demographics and government programs to encourage intellectual migration supported the narrative about highly educated, high earning migrants, and this narrative was transmitted by the government.*

Poland, male respondent between 30 and 50

The experience of having personal contacts with Belarusians (perhaps instances of so-called “weak contacts”¹) has a long-term impact on images of Belarus.

Respondents have repeatedly noted that at the level of interpersonal contacts with locals (in all countries), Belarusians as a people usually have a good reputation; as a result, they often encounter neutral or even positive attitudes from people they meet. This may largely be due to previous experiences with Belarusians. As one respondent put it, therefore, “it is important not to tarnish our reputation.”

Measures taken by the diaspora to shape images of Belarus or promote Belarusian issues on the local agenda can be divided into three categories:

- cooperation with the local media – while cooperation used to be quite robust, it has now all but ceased (at least, the level is not comparable to 2020-2021);
- mass street demonstrations – these include anti-war demonstrations, support for Ukraine, or displays of solidarity with the victims of the Belarusian regime, which are accompanied by awareness-raising material for local residents (such measures could also include information about Belarusian political prisoners placed in public spaces in large cities);
- stationary events – these are held with varying regularity in specific places (more often indoors, less often outdoors) and usually have an educational and cultural bent. The target audiences for such events are usually rather limited: local intellectuals, students, fellow activists from local NGOs, bystanders, etc.

Direct cooperation with host countries’ governments was barely mentioned by respondents. Most probably, representatives of Belarusian diasporas and public organizations leave this means of shaping the image of Belarus to Belarusian democratic political actors. The only exception is the diaspora in Georgia. Due to the absence of any representation of the Belarusian political bloc in this country, it has fallen to activists from the diaspora to advocate for Belarusian issues; they are independently defending and lobbying for the interests of Belarusians abroad.

Another issue that came up in our research is the interaction of Belarusians with representatives of other “new” diasporas that appeared after 2022 — namely Ukrainians and Russians. Apparently, cooperation is rather minimal. When it does arise, it is due to specific interpersonal contacts, not sector-level organizational interactions.

Even among the diasporic communities of Belarusians, Ukrainians and Russians, who would seem to have common values and problems, there is practically no cooperation. In the case of Ukrainian organizations/communities, Belarusians note an almost automatic reaction of distrust and fear. Processing such attitudes often requires a lot of effort and time, and it does not always bring the expected results. As for communities and organizations of Russians in exiles, respondents noted both the limited contacts and periodic friction caused by their “inevitable imperialism” — even among Russians who have liberal values.

In addition, some respondents expressed the opinion that Russians and Ukrainians create grassroots diaspora communities much less frequently than Belarusians.

¹ Granovetter, M. S. (1973) «The strength of weak ties». American Journal of Psychology, 78 (6), pp. 1360–1380.

PROBLEMS

Aside from issues that cannot currently be changed, respondents noted the following problems associated with shaping the image of Belarus abroad.

- efforts to influence representations of Belarus are ad-hoc and quite spontaneous, without any strategic plan or coordination with Belarusians of other communities or the public sector (with the exception of anti-war actions and events whose scale and importance unite all Belarusians, such as events in honor of August 9, 2020 or reactions to the death of Belarusian political prisoners);
- fragmentation of the Belarusian diaspora: there are few connections or common projects among diasporic communities, even within the same country (in Georgia, inter-city diasporic ties are significantly more robust) or between various sectors and spheres of Belarusian civil society;
- the lack of a common PR strategy for both the diaspora and the democratic forces in general. Of course, the question arises whether it is possible to build such a system at all. But what is possible, at the very least, is to align positions and identify the basic principles, directions and messages of media work going forward;
- the prevailing fixation on the negative consequences of the events of 2020-2021, including repressions, exile, resistance to the co-aggressor regime, etc. These themes are also necessary, but to make media outreach more effective, there is a critical need for positive news items for promoting Belarusian issues on the local agenda.

Besides the problems already noted, there is also the somewhat closed nature of Belarusian NGOs, as well as their focus on Belarusian issues and/or the problems of the diaspora. On one hand, this is understandable; on the other, this focus on domestic issues doesn't make promoting Belarusian issues in the local media very easy.

Another important nuance must also be noted: when Belarusian organizations work to raise awareness about their country and what's happening there, campaigns often focus on an international context that is broader than the country they're working in. One manifestation of this is that English is often used to relay information about their activities. This underestimation of the vital role of the local language often correlates with a lack of attention to, or, more accurately, a lack of knowledge about the local context: history, culture, mentality, etc. The specifics of the host country are rarely taken into account.

Regarding the language issue, one more important point should be noted: use of the Belarusian language must increase. Despite the supposed cosmopolitanism of liberal-democratic values, neither English, nor Russian, can earn respect for Belarusians as a nation or as a society — especially in the post-Soviet space.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It is currently impossible for Belarusians abroad to create a unified image of Belarus due to the existence in locals' minds of several active narrative components, each with their own semantic baggage: a) the Belarusian state/Lukashenka regime, b) Belarusian society discontent with Lukashenka, c) the Belarusian diaspora, whose numbers have increased in recent years, d) individual Belarusians as a representative of the Belarusian people.

The influence of the Belarusian protest movement in 2020-2021 on perceptions of Belarus is almost nil. Currently, two narratives are most salient: 1) the participation of Belarus as a state (regime) in Russia's aggression against Ukraine, 2) perceptions of Belarus shaped by national history and lived experience.

Belarusians abroad are trying to influence representations of Belarus in the countries where they live, notably through large-scale demonstrations and special events. The main messages promoted by Belarusians include the underlining the difference between Belarusian society and the Lukashenka regime, condemning the war, supporting Ukraine, and raising awareness about political prisoners and the scale of repressions in Belarus.

All of these tendencies have their roots in 2021-2022; no new images have appeared since. Respondents note that to better promote Belarus's image, there is an urgent need for positive, hopeful messages.

In general, respondents are acutely aware of the lack of systematic efforts to create a common narrative for the diaspora and NGOs to promote among non-Belarusian audiences. Another important disadvantage is the lack of attention to local languages, context, and history.

Given the context described above, the following measures could help optimize efforts to influence representations of Belarus:

- create/strengthen ties between influential actors of the Belarusian opposition, including political figures, public organizations, and local diaspora communities (both between actors within one field and between various sectors);
- create either a unified narrative regarding representations of Belarus, or, at the very least, align on the fundamental premises for advancing them together, such as through diaspora conferences or the collaborative efforts of national embassies (e.g., "seven key points to communicate about Belarus and Belarusians in 5-10 minutes");
- focus on the local contexts of individual countries, with their own unique languages, history, and political situation;
- train up and expand the pool of experts on various subjects who, if necessary, can comment on events connected with Belarus in the local media and in local languages;
- promote images of Belarus using both traditional means (through media, demonstrations and lobbying, in daily communication), as well as more creative ones (e.g., by inserting the Belarusian experience into educational and expert materials);
- use Belarusian and local languages more often in day-to-day communications.

METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

This study was conducted in February–March 2024, using in-depth interviews as the research method.

In-depth interviews are a qualitative method that does not presume to be representative. The purpose of in-depth interviews is to capture the meanings, opinions, and assessments surrounding a particular issue; i.e., to create a palette of possibilities without attempting to ascribe to them quantitative or weighted representativeness.

A total of 12 participants participated in the study. They included Belarusian activists (six men and six women), who participated in the events of 2020 in some form or another and are currently involved in the work of Belarusian organizations in exile.

Five of the Belarusian activists were operating in Poland, three were in Lithuania, and one was in Georgia. Several individuals had resided long-term in multiple countries: first in Georgia, then Poland (2 respondents), and first in Lithuania, then Poland (1 respondent). These respondents therefore served as sources of information on two countries.

Country	Number of respondents
Poland	8
Lithuania	4
Georgia	3

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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