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A SNAPSHOT OF THE BELARUSIAN DIASPORA: *TIES AND PROSPECTS*

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Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians have fled their country because of the political crisis. In the last two years, Belarusians abroad have formed new communities, started businesses, and launched many projects and initiatives. Because of the totalitarian repressions in Belarus — as well as the emigration of civil society, the independent media, and the political opposition — responsibility for how Belarusian society progresses now lies firmly on the shoulders of Belarusians abroad.

Narodny Opros (National Poll), along with the Center for New Ideas, has conducted a survey of the Belarusian diaspora in order to gain a better understanding of the nature of Belarusians abroad, what kind of connections members of the Belarusian diaspora have forged in their adoptive countries, and what their views on the future are. The online survey was conducted between 3 and 30 October 2022 using Viber and Telegram bots. A total of 1,631 respondents took part.

There is no precise data on the exact number of Belarusians who have emigrated; therefore, this study should be taken as an illustration of trends emerging in the Belarusian diaspora rather than as a fully representative sociological survey. In studying the Belarusian diaspora, we noted that a high level of civic involvement, internal cohesion, and close ties with Belarus are characteristic of the Belarusian diaspora. All these aspects are united by a general inclination towards civic activity and solidarity with the Belarusian agenda. Therefore, we based our conclusions on the assumption that the characteristics and tendencies described in our research are true for the entire Belarusian diaspora — that is the civic-minded segment of Belarusians abroad.

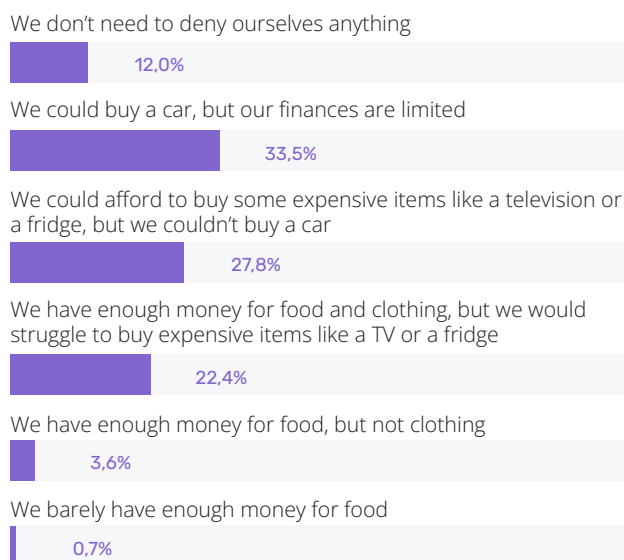
The Belarusian diaspora is young, educated, and financially secure

The vast majority of members of the Belarusian diaspora have higher education (74% responded that they did so; another 13% claimed to have completed post-graduate education). More than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the diaspora are younger than 40: 30% are 18–30, and 47% are 31–40. Among civic-minded Belarusian emigrants, 53% were men and 46% were women (0.6% chose “other” when asked about their gender).

Half of Belarusians abroad work as permanent employees in the private sector; another ~20% identify as freelancers (self-employed, sole proprietors). Most of the Belarusian diaspora enjoy relatively high earnings: 12% earn very high salaries, 34% have enough money buy a car, and 28% can afford to freely make expensive purchases.

Diagram 1

How would you describe your family's financial situation?



Almost all respondents had left Belarus legally (96%). The lowest percentage of legal border crossings occurred in 2021 (92%), when political factors were compounded by COVID restrictions.

When moving abroad, 19% turned to NGOs, civic initiatives, and projects for help and advice. The peak of this activity occurred in 2020–21, when about one quarter of emigrating Belarusians sought help.

The start of the latest phase of Russia’s war against Ukraine had a significant impact on Belarusian emigrants. Since February 24, 2022, 39% of Belarusians abroad have changed their place of residence once or more (35%). People who left Belarus in 2022 moved the most.

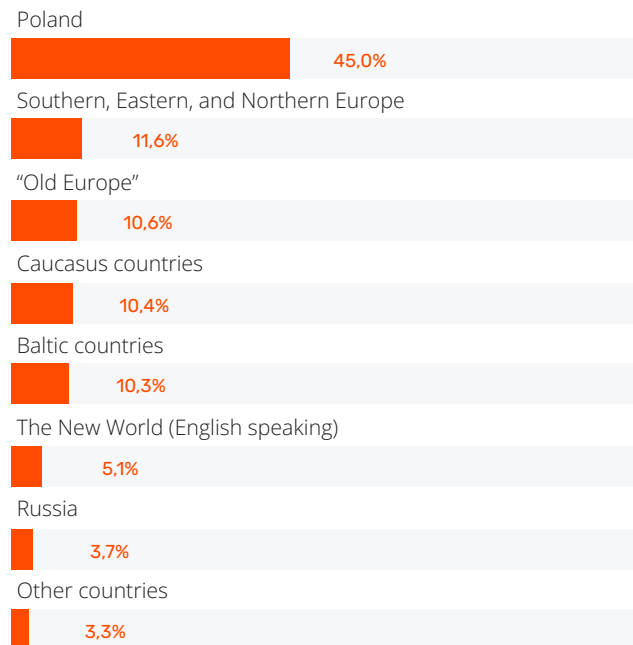
At the time of the survey, 1 in every 8 respondents (13%) were still planning to change their country of residence. The top three countries to which people planned to move were Poland (24%), Germany (9%), and the US (7%).

The largest share of Belarusians who left the country did so in 2021–2022 and now reside in Poland, Georgia, or Lithuania

The top three countries receiving civic-minded Belarusians are Poland (45%), Georgia (10%), and Lithuania (8%). In fourth place is Germany (6%). The times in which large influxes to these regions occurred are markedly different. Thus, the largest share of the Belarusian diaspora in “Old Europe” (Germany, France, the UK), the New World, and Russia comprises people who left Belarus before 2015. The second-largest share arrived between 2015 and 2019. In Poland, as in other countries that aren’t part of “Old Europe”, the largest wave of Belarusian migrants arrived in 2021. The Georgian and Lithuanian diasporas saw the largest influx of newcomers in 2022.

Diagram 2

What country do you live in now?

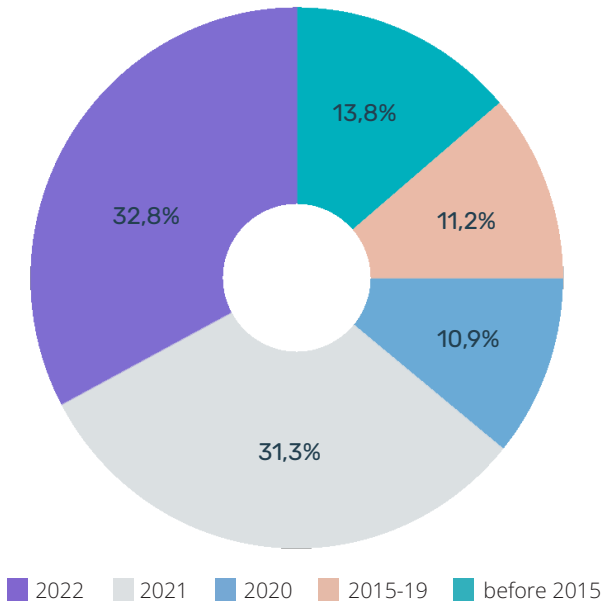


The largest share of the civic-minded segment of the Belarusian diaspora (64%) comprises people who left Belarus in 2021–22. Given the totalitarian repressions taking place in Belarus and the sheer scale of emigration from the country, this pattern is predictable.

On the other hand, there is a strikingly high share of individuals (14%) who left Belarus 8-10-15 years ago but nevertheless remain invested and actively involved in efforts to help Belarus. In fact, this is the core of the Belarusian diaspora—they have the most resilient motivation and the most experience working and functioning abroad. The fact that their numbers are so great gives reason to hope that more recent emigrants will also remain proactive in the long term.

Diagram 3

When did you leave Belarus?



People leave in search of security, because of lack of prospects, and due to the economic crisis

The reasons people leave Belarus can be divided into several blocks: problems with security, lack of prospects, and economic factors.

The first and best-represented block corresponds to Belarusians who left due to security considerations. There is a growing sense of insecurity (which peaked in 2022), fear of persecution by the regime (peaking in 2021), and desire to avoid punishments imposed by the regime (peaking in 2020). These reasons are especially relevant for the most recent wave of migration, which was triggered by the events of 2020.

In second place is the feeling that there is a lack of prospects in the country: people want to gain new experiences and see the world. The third block consists of economic reasons. The reasons included in this block are more characteristic of earlier waves of migration (before 2020); their popularity among the latest waves of migration is significantly lower.

Diagram 4

Why did you leave Belarus?



Diaspora Belarusians maintain close ties with their homeland

Belarusians abroad continue to be invested in events unfolding in Belarus: 9 out of 10 read news about their country at least once a day (75% of respondents do so multiple times a day). Members of the Belarusian diaspora maintain ties with close ones who have remained in Belarus. Above all, this concerns relatives (93%) and friends (80%). Regular communication with colleagues and like-minded people who have remained in the country is much less frequent.

Diagram 5

Do you keep in touch with people who have remained in Belarus?



In addition to personal connections, Belarusians abroad maintain ties with various communities—albeit to a lesser degree. The findings of this research show that ties with location-based communities and corporate/professional groups are the most likely to fade. Communities that retain the greatest potential are not tied to specific organizations; instead, they are formed around independent projects and initiatives.

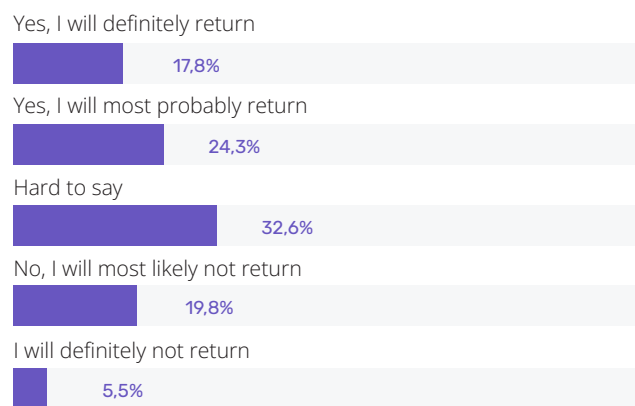
Inter-diasporic ties among Belarusians abroad can be characterized as very close. A total of 95% of respondents indicated that they cultivate relations with other Belarusians who have left their homeland in some way or another. A distinctive feature of these ties is their cross-border nature: most respondents (61%) communicate primarily with Belarusians around the world rather than the country they live in (45%; meanwhile, 52% communicate primarily with Belarusians living in the same city).

A quarter of Belarusians abroad do not plan on returning

One of the most sensitive migration-related questions for Belarusians is whether they want to go back home. Are they planning on returning to Belarus? At present, our findings point to a tentatively optimistic state of affairs: **42% of respondents want to return to Belarus (18% say they will definitely return), while 25% do not plan on returning (6% say that they will definitely not go back).** That said, the most common response was “hard to say”—it was chosen by 36% of respondents.

Diagram 6

Do you even plan on returning to Belarus to live?



If we look at the distribution of responses in different periods corresponding to various waves of migration, a well-known fact is confirmed. The longer people spend abroad—even in forced emigration—the weaker their intention of returning to their homeland.

The decision to return home is also contingent on the domestic political situation. Thus, on one hand, 95% of respondents indicated that the continued existence of the Lukashenka regime in Belarus influences their decision-making regarding whether to return. Correspondingly, a regime change would lead to a large-scale wave of repatriation, i.e., a return of Belarusians to Belarus.

On the other hand, we see that whereas the “Lukashenka factor” is the main thing preventing people from returning to Belarus in the initial years of migration, with time the importance of this reason begins to diminish. In other words, as people settle down in a new place, other factors become more salient (children, new jobs, obligations, prospects, etc.).

The decision “not to return” taken by one segment of the Belarusian diaspora does not imply a severing of ties with Belarus. Of those who don’t plan on returning, 70% plan on participating in the development of Belarus after Lukashenka’s departure.

How is the diaspora involved in the Belarusian agenda?

The main forms of assistance to Belarus that Belarusians plan to focus on are:

- Investing their own knowledge, skills, and abilities into projects that benefit Belarus (including ones on Belarusian territory), 53% of those who don’t plan on returning to Belarus declared such intentions;
- Crowdfunding for civil society in Belarus, indicated by 51% of respondents;
- Contributing financially to educational and cultural projects in Belarus (50%).

We also found that out of those who don’t plan on returning to Belarus, 34% were prepared to invest in business projects in a new Belarus, 29% would be willing to open a business in Belarus, and 26% would make financial contributions to infrastructure projects in Belarus.

ABOUT AUTHOR



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He holds a PhD in sociology and specializes in public opinion analysis. Main areas of research: social structures, processes and institutions, sociology of revolution, processes of nation-building, dynamics of the media space.

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**NATIONAL
POLL**

National Poll is an independent project for the study of public opinion in Belarus.

[*https://narodny-opros.net*](https://narodny-opros.net)

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The Center for New Ideas is a think tank dedicated to developing ideas on how to take advantage of the opportunities and respond to the challenges that Belarus faces in the 21st century. Our mission is to help political and social organisations build a more open, prosperous, and resilient Belarus.

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Photo by Pavel Krichko

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