



LINES OF CONFLICT AMONG BELARUSIAN PRO-DEMOCRACY ACTIVISTS

(Belarus, Poland, Lithuania)

June 2024



CONTEXT

The Belarusian protest movement of 2020 united a variety of groups that differed not only in socio-demographic parameters, but also in value orientations and political views. The diversity of the composition of those who took to the streets in August-December 2020 has been repeatedly emphasized by researchers as one of the features of the protest movement. It is important to understand that the processes of solidarization at that time embraced many people and social groups that previously had nothing in common with each other and were united only by the appropriation of a common situation. The situation included the accumulated discontent during the first wave of COVID, the “stolen” elections and the unprecedented violence during the crackdown on protests).

Massive expression of solidarity in an existential situation creates a special kind of connections between people («horizontal sociality» [1] by H. Korshunau) and a special kind of communities («community of the dismayed» [2] by T. Shchitzova). But the effect of solidarity can never be long-term. With the end of a «catastrophic» situation, the communities created by it either disappear or evolve. If the situation remains unfinished, the following transformation scenarios are possible for the relations created in the communities during the process of mass solidarization:

1. To «routinize» and «normalize» the situation, along with the disruption of relations and atomization.
2. Polarization of society and the search for the guilty, with the creation of internal enemy camps or tribalization.
3. To maintain solidarity as a state of society, while creating a new identity within the community.

The participants of the 2020 protest movement share not only a common past, common (unfulfilled) goals, but also a common present, since the widespread repression does not allow to “finalize” the situation and “turn the page” [3]. During the events of 2020-2023, the “community of the dismayed” came together. It was confronted with essential and situational problems that revealed pre-existing “lines of difference” or created new lines of demarcation that could potentially generate conflicts within the (so far?) unified community.

1 Korshunau H. Systemic crisis of relations between government and society <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/sistemnyy-krizis-vzaimootnosheniy-vlasti-i-obschestva/pdf>; Korshunau H. Horizontal ties: what is left of those self-organization structures that emerged in 2020 <https://bit.ly/horizontal-con>

2 Shchitzova T. Toward a genealogy of the “community of the dismayed”: common sense - sensus communis - koine aesthesis https://www.iwm.at/sites/default/files/2021-03/RU_Shchytsova_Common%20sense%5B5527%5D.pdf ; Shchitzova T. Sovereign power and ethics of non-violence: structural bases of civil mobilization in Belarus <https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/suverennaya-vlast-i-etika-nenasiliya-strukturnye-osnovaniya-grazhdanskoy-mobilizatsii-v-belarusi/viewer>

3 Popular Belarusian meme.

What are these lines of difference and do they exist? Between whom (groups), on what basis (criteria), and when (triggers) do they occur? To what extent are they conflict-generating (direction and degree)? How are they influenced by propaganda (media in general, bloggers in particular)? These questions are still poorly understood.

Some data from the Chatham House and «People's Poll» (Narodnae apytanne) surveys allow us to speak about differences in the assessment of the strategies of the political centers of the democratic movement and about some other significant borderlines. The most important of them was supposedly the assessment of Russia's actions in February 2022. However, the issue of conflicts or disagreements within the Belarusian protest community has so far remained beyond the scope of serious and consistent analysis.

However, if we are forward-looking, we need to know these fault lines now, as well as their severity and criticality, and work out ways to address them.

The pre-project analysis of publications in the main Belarusian media [4] shows that there are indeed high-level communicative conflicts among the Belarusian pro-democracy audience. The conflicts take place mainly in social networks, but sometimes their tension reaches such a level that the «classical» media react as well.

It's important that this tension is not a permanent feature of the audience, at least the tension that is resolved with large-scale communicative fights called «bulbasrachy» (i.e. quarrels between Belarusians in a humiliating way). It is obvious that what we observe from the media reactions is the ripple effect. Our analysis [5] shows that 2022 turned out to be the most «fruitful» year for such outbursts of mutual negativity. Out of 30 publications that touched on or described such disputes in the media and Telegram channels over a period of more than three years, 20 cases, or $\frac{2}{3}$, appeared in 2022. And eleven publications, more than half, were published in just two months, namely in July and August 2022 [6].

Rising tensions that provoke disputes among Belarusians (the so-called «bulbasrachy») are most often a reaction to some occasion, both of a media/blogging and event nature.

For example, in January 2024, the reason for another «bulbasrach» was the arrest of the musicians of the Nizkiz band. The connotation was how someone with a protest background could still stay in Belarus. In 2023, the medal with the slogan «Belarus is above all», the disagreement within the political forces and the attitude to the language issue were mentioned in the media. In 2022, we can distinguish two blocks of topics that caused tension: a) conventionally «traditional» (those who left and those who stayed; the language issue) and b) «political» (the entities and actions of pro-democracy forces).

4 Zerkalo, Belsat, Nasha Niva, Radio Svaboda, Euroradio, Malanka Media, Mediazona, Gazetaby (Салідарнасць), Novy Chas.

5 The search on the websites of the media by keywords “bulbosrach”, “bulbasrach” (“бульбосрач”, “бульбасрач”) for the period of 2021-2024. The additional search was done through telegram channels. In total, for more than 3 years, 30 publications were found that elaborate on the topic of “bulbosrach”.

6 For reference: 2021 - 3 publications, 2023 - 5 publications, 2024 - 2 publications (both on the Nizkiz case).

The background, which is present in almost all cases when discussing Belarusian disputes, is the difference/distinction/mutual accusations between «those who left» and «those who stayed».

The analysis of the publications in the mass media shows that journalists and experts, when discussing the issue of «leave or stay», most often explain the conflict either by the general traumatic nature of the situation, the need to throw off aggression, to redirect it from the real object (the regime) to the available one («friendlies», the people on one's own side who have chosen a different strategy of behavior), or simply by the peculiarities of the Belarusian communication. Attempts to explicate deeper reasons or reasons other than psychological are rare. On the contrary, the typical attitude of both journalists and experts is to postulate the situational and psychological nature of the conflict.

The screening of social networks shows that, regardless of the occasion and the content of the discussion, we can identify two main directions in the debate on «to leave or to stay». They are:

1. Personal choice, its reasons, awareness, the right of a person to control his/her destiny
2. Responsibility to others (from close relatives to «audiences», «colleagues» and «a common endeavor»), as well as the «public good» of a particular strategy.

In addition, we can identify another theme that emerged later, that of returning home, now or in the future. The theme of returning now basically falls into a similar framework, either security or responsibility for the choice. But there is another theme of returning when the situation changes. That is, if those who left come back, will they have a place to return to, and how will those who stayed in Belarus all this time receive them?

It is noteworthy that the topic of emigration from Belarus, its circumstances, consequences and individual emotional upheavals of escape/evacuation/relocation, as well as the topic of life in Belarus are discussed in a variety of contexts. Most often it is an explanation of personal experiences, emotional struggle and reflections of those who left Belarus and those «friends» who stayed in Belarus. It is accompanied by the reaction of support, sympathy and sharing of the situation. Thus, the discourse of solidarity is supported.

The results of the pre-project analysis suggest that there is a certain «asymmetry» of conflict communication. Most likely, this is directly related to the «asymmetry of publicity» that grows over time as people living in Belarus are increasingly forced to self-censor, but not only. The decision to leave Belarus has been fully approved by the reference group since 2020, and the further it goes, the more «clear» it is and the less it needs explanation. But the decision in favor of «staying in Belarus with a protest background» requires more explanation the further it goes. The last case with Nizkiz is a dramatic example [7].

7 Why Belarusians reproach the musicians from Nizkiz, but not those who detained them <https://euroradio.fm/ru/pochemu-belorusy-uprekayut-muzykantov-iz-nizkiz-ne-tekh-kto-ikh-zaderzhal>

METHODOLOGY

As part of our search for answers to the above questions, we conducted 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews with Belarusians now living in Belarus and in other countries. These are Poland and Lithuania, the two largest recipient countries of the «new» Belarusian migration.

The number of respondents was distributed as follows:

- Belarus: 15 interviews
- Poland: 8 interviews
- Lithuania: 7 interviews.

All respondents were more or less active participants in the Belarusian events of 2020-2021.

An additional criterion for inclusion in the sample was the fact that they belonged to one of the professional groups most affected by the repression, namely journalism, education and science, students, medicine, IT, business, lawyers, culture, the third sector, and the labor movement.

The main focus (subject) of the research was both existing and potential lines of tension/conflict between different segments or groups of the pro-democratic part of Belarusian society.

During the research, the following tasks were accomplished:

- To identify the main target groups/opinion groups between which demarcation lines of conflict or potential conflict are formed.
- To identify the reasons and factors for the emergence of conflicting lines of demarcation between target groups/opinion groups. This includes the selection of a set of verbal markers for describing «others» for the future.
- To identify the characteristics of the situational genesis of conflict lines, namely triggering causes and media issues.
- To create a model of possible variants of the dynamics of relations between the key groups of Belarusian pro-democracy activists (opinion groups).

As an additional practical goal, we considered developing a guide for communication between groups that choose different strategies.

Note: The report uses quotes from in-depth interviews, which are italicized in the text. To protect the anonymity of respondents, quotes are signed as follows: *country, respondent, age group*.

KEY DEMARCATION LINES

In 2020, we observed a high degree of solidarity among the people who came out to protest. At that time, it looked like a unified movement, with all the differences between the participants left outside.

A lot of time has passed since then, but activists tend to believe that the main points that used to unite the protesters have remained. First of all, it is dissatisfaction with the current situation and its uncertainty, rejection of violence and Lukashenka's regime, and a principled, though unspecified, stance for change in Belarus:

– *We know what we want to get away from, but we don't know where to go.*
(Poland, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– *...not accepting the culture code dictated by the authorities.*
(Lithuania, male respondent, 31-40 years old)

– *It was the unification not “for” but “against”. The “against” remained, but there are a lot of questions about the ideas of what to do next, how to survive, what should Belarus look like in the future?*
(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

Another unifying factor is the hope that everything, including the sacrifices, «was not in vain».

– *Well, there is hope for a final change. After 4 years, everyone is tired and does not believe that it will happen tomorrow, but many people still hope that it will happen in the near future.*

(Belarus, female respondent, 21-30 years old)

In addition, the themes that allow the participants of the 2020 protest movement to maintain solidarity are the desire to free political prisoners and the self-awareness of being Belarusian against all odds, as well as the unifying challenges such as the threat of the (Russian) empire restoration and Russia's war with Ukraine.

At the same time, changes are accumulating. This provokes the emergence of certain lines of conflict-generating demarcation or tension between different groups of the pro-democratic part of the Belarusian society. There are enough lines of tension between different groups of the pro-democratic part of society, but most of them are of general significance.

Thus, the activists from Lithuania and Poland mention different attitudes towards the «language issue», misunderstandings between different diaspora communities («old» and «new» diaspora [8]), and contradictions between representatives and supporters of different political forces. The latter refers primarily to the split between the supporters of Zianon Pazniak and other political blocs, but sometimes the difference between the «old» and «new» opposition is also noticeable.

8 See, for example: «The old Vilnius emigration did not merge with the new one: Belarusians are mentally different» <https://d1a9nmcvk9pjz.cloudfront.net/340041>

To a certain extent, this generation gap overlaps with the conflict of values between the holders of the conservative-nationalist and the liberal-democratic belief systems.

– The first ones support more conservative values, where the nation and the Belarusian identity come first. They are skeptical about the values of gender equality, LGBT and so on. The second group is more concerned with universal values. Not national values, but democracy and freedoms come first.

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

According to the respondents, this confrontation of values is generally manifested among representatives of different political forces, although it is widespread in the society. It is important to note that the respondents from Poland most often point to the strategic importance of this value demarcation.

The Belarusian respondents consider all segregation based on ideology and allegiance to certain political forces to be much less important. They exist as if on the periphery of their attention and are usually not perceived as large-scale and fundamental. Belarusians in Belarus note a certain level of conflict between supporters of different political leaders, but in general they treat such conflicts as intercommunity «squabbles» or a struggle for resources.

– Well, there are admirers of various leaders, but that's not what's going on in the country right now.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– We just don't have a sufficient level of political culture for people to clash over ideological issues.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– I hear it as if through a broken phone. Yes, it still exists, but since I'm here, it doesn't affect me at all. So I can't say that I see any confrontation now, for example, between Tsikhanouskaya and, I don't know, some Tsepkalo or someone else.

(Belarus, female respondent, 21-30 years old)

When discussing local issues that create tensions between different groups of democratically-minded Belarusians, the respondents from Belarus cite different strategies for releasing political prisoners and different perceptions of the past.

It is about the events of 2020 and whether the strategy of peaceful protest was justified or whether it was necessary to switch to a use-of-force scenario.

Respondents from Belarus don't see a particular split in the pro-democracy environment on the basis of geopolitical orientations. They note that «after the war in Ukraine, the Russian card has become impossible for democratic forces». However, they mention a potential problem in relations with people who, despite the fact that they are not supporters of the Kremlin and have a geopolitical orientation towards Russia, are nevertheless increasingly forced to come into contact with Russian companies, organizations, travel to Russia for work, study, and so on. On the one hand, as the Russian influence in Belarus grows, this process seems inevitable; on the other hand, it is still perceived as a problem requiring a moral and ethical choice.

Undoubtedly, the biggest difference is in the understanding of Belarusian activists in Belarus and Lithuania/Poland about the existence of conflict-generating and demarcation lines between supporters of different strategies of resistance to the regime. For the respondents from Lithuania and Poland, the different answers to the question about the necessary and sufficient activity in resistance to the regime are one of the main issues causing divisions and conflicts. This question covers a wide range of variations, as measures of resistance to the regime are considered at all levels. This consideration begins with the question of whether or not to negotiate with the regime, continues with the question of the necessity of armed resistance, and ends with the question of international sanctions, namely whether they should be expanded or, on the contrary, abolished.

– The main thing is negotiations with the regime. Babaryka’s supporters seem to be in favor of negotiations. The United Transitional Cabinet seems to be against it. The Kalinovsky regiment is offering a military option. As for a peaceful way, it is not clear what they suggest.

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

– It is possible to hear from someone from abroad that they would not regret or they would understand if Ukraine responds with an attack on Belarus, after the missiles flew.... It is barbaric!

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– Everyone has the same goal, but the ways to get there are different.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

A special question for the activists from Poland and Lithuania was what can be done and should be done by those who are now in Belarus.

– People in Belarus don’t think it’s worthwhile to take any noticeable actions now, in order not to go to jail. And abroad, some people say that they have become silent and resigned”.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

The respondents from Belarus see almost no divisions and conflicts between the supporters of different strategies of struggle against the regime, because they do not see any strategies.

– Now I don’t see or hear any proposals about any active actions for the hour X, for some notorious window of opportunity.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– In today’s circumstances, no one offers anything clearer than some scenarios, because active resistance, self-preservation, or something else are scenarios. And why discuss a script if you don’t direct a movie? I don’t see any tension here. There may be controversy when such substantial plans or proposals emerge, but not now.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

The attitude of respondents from Belarus to the issue of active forms of resistance to the regime is often reflected through the prism of ideas about what Belarusians should do inside the country. Sometimes it happens in a rather sarcastic form:

– The pattern is that the most active people we have are not in the country. It is those who have left the country who are most calling for active resistance.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

Even when discussing the various lines of demarcation in the Belarusian pro-democracy community, it is obvious that the ideas and priorities of respondents from Belarus differ from those of respondents from Lithuania and Poland. Quite often, Belarusians are contextually divided into Belarusians inside the country and Belarusians outside the country. One of the most important lines of division is or will be between those who left Belarus and those who stayed there^[9].

These two points are, in a way, a question of the activity of resistance and of the state of society on both sides of the border. They can be seen as two sides of the same coin.

As a rule, those Belarusians who can afford it, i.e. Belarusians abroad, express more active patterns of confrontation. Those Belarusians who remain in the country cannot afford it. In the context of constant repressive pressure, threats of persecution and imprisonment, they naturally follow the strategy of self-preservation and reduced activity in order not to «get on the radar» of the security forces of the Belarusian regime.

It should be noted that Belarusians in Poland speak much more often about the problem of a possible rift between those who left Belarus and those who stayed in Belarus than Belarusians in Lithuania. Probably, this is due to the fact that «Polish» Belarusians are spread over a large area and are geographically far from Belarus. And the majority of «Lithuanian» Belarusians are concentrated in Vilnius, which is only tens of kilometers from the Belarusian border. Currently, there are more border crossings with Belarus here than in Poland. Therefore, for Belarusians, Lithuania may seem closer both geographically and logistically.

In any case, the majority of respondents from Poland and Lithuania consider the problem of separation of Belarusians inside and outside the country to be an important, large-scale and multifaceted problem. Because at the level of interpersonal relations, especially between relatives, mutual understanding is mostly maintained today.

– ...I haven't lost any of my closest environment! None of my friends broke away. The same is with my son.

(Poland, female respondent, 61+ years old)

At least, people try to understand each other and to give each other all the support they can.

⁹ We'd like to note that, according to the 2022 survey, we were unlikely to talk about tensions between those who went abroad and those who stayed in Belarus (see Belarusian Diaspora: Portrait, Connections and Prospects). - <https://newbelarus.vision/belaruskaya-diaspora/>

– I only read in the media about the conflict between those who left and those who stayed. I would say that, on the contrary, there is mutual support.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

For the respondents from Belarus, the division into «those who left» and «those who stayed» is the most significant demarcation line dividing participants in the 2020 protest movement. This is the division they talk about first and foremost, without any additional or leading questions.

– People found themselves in different situations, some were imprisoned, some left (Belarus), some stayed there and had to adapt to new conditions. A large number of different groups emerged, depending on how exactly one was affected by the situation.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– What divides us is the question of what to do in the conditions of a conventional concentration camp. We are separated by the issue of concrete actions. To live here with the risk of going to prison, or to do everything possible to ensure one's safety, for example, to leave.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The authorities achieve their goal - we live very differently, those in the country and those outside. We “reveal” ourselves in different ways. I don't think there are any serious differences in the idea of a distant bright future, but today's horizon is very different.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

This separation - at least rhetorically - is not perceived by the respondents as a conflict one, neither now nor in the foreseeable future. Rather, it is noted that the distance between those who left Belarus and those who continue to live here is growing. And there is a growing “parallelism” of the universes “inside” and “outside” the perimeter. This process is perceived as natural, which has objective and subjective reasons.

Despite the continued existence of the value base that united the protesters in 2020-21, Belarusians abroad believe that the emerging situation encourages both the manifestation of previous differences and the creation of new lines of tension between different groups of the pro-democratic part of Belarusian society.

According to Belarusians in Poland and Lithuania, the two main lines of demarcation are: a) the question of the level of activity in the struggle against the regime, and b) the difference between those who left Belarus and those who remain in Belarus. For respondents from Belarus, most of the distinctions within the pro-democracy community exist as if on the periphery of their attention, the main significant line of demarcation is the difference between those who left and those who stayed.

REASONS AND FACTORS OF DEMARCATION

Despite the efforts to maintain communication and keep in touch «across borders», time passes and people begin to feel that their connections, even friendly ones, are gradually weakening.

– I get a lot of support, a lot of likes and “we are waiting for you”. But on a daily level, I realize that I am losing contact because we live in different realities. My contacts disappear without a fight, unnoticed. It’s as if there is less common ground. There’s less to talk about. If there’s a chance to come back, we’ll come back different. And the different us will have a completely different experience.

(Poland, female respondent, 40-50 years old)

– We can continue to believe in our ideological unity, that we still want roughly the same things. But the difference in lifestyle is huge - you go down one corridor here, they walk down another. And that has a big impact.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

As a matter of fact, respondents quite often note that the main reasons for the increase of distance between different groups of Belarusians are time and everyday life, i.e. the inevitable and fair accumulation of different experiences in solving certain life issues and problems.

Irrespective of this, it should be noted that the respondents talk about misunderstandings and tensions not only between those who stayed in Belarus and those who left. Among the latter, for various reasons of a special, diasporic genesis, there are also very noticeable differences. By the way, Belarusians in Poland talk more about this.

– Different lifestyles, different problems, even in Lithuania and Poland they are different.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 31-40 years old)

The most tangible factors of such intra-diasporic demarcation are both the peculiarities that the receiving countries create for Belarusians, and the specific situation in the diasporic environment.

– Different contexts reflect different financial situation.

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

– ...For some, security means controlling others, just as the authorities do. For others, it is simply not being beaten.

(Poland, female respondent, 40-50 years old)

– Now there are conflicts even within our own “pot” about connections with the (Belarusian) police and the KGB. Freedom Day showed that people are very afraid. Because the security forces have started going hard at their relatives and taking away their property.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

Because of these different experiences, we are gradually losing mutual understanding, which gives way to a certain tension. First of all, between those who left Belarus and those who stayed.

– Splits or not, but the debates are sometimes ferocious!

(Lithuania, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– Not a hell of a grudge, but more of a reproach.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

The respondents from Belarus say that difficulties in communication or rather, a decrease in its intensity arise, among other things, because the common agenda is lost. The problems and challenges facing people on both sides of the border are too different. This applies to both political and everyday issues.

– The situation in Belarus is seen differently by those who live in Belarus and those who are outside it. For those outside Belarus, it really seems that there is some activity going on, that Tikhanouskaya's office is doing something there... Probably, it all makes some sense. But from inside Belarus, all the fuss that the office and other similar structures are engaged in, doesn't look significant at all, because they don't really influence anything inside the country...

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The daily challenges, the short-term challenges are different. Short-term survival strategies are different, and that, of course, affects the levels of behavior. Those who have left can speak out and see it as their mission. Those who have not left are forced to be silent; if they want to live in the country and do something, they have to do it quietly. We are in a situation where the behavior of some of us is a condemnation of the behavior of others.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

It should be noted that the depth of experience and the level of reflection on the reasons for the demarcation of Belarusians inside and outside the country are much higher for those participants of the 2020 protest movement who still continue socio-political activity in Belarus in one form or another. This is especially true for those areas of activity that have been almost completely destroyed inside the country - NGOs, journalism, as well as cultural and local activism.

– We are increasingly living in parallel. Conflicts are revealed in the search for resources and don't become public, partly because our side is forced to keep silent. We are approaching a situation of not accepting each other, of building fences. You live your life, we live ours.

(Belarus, female respondent, 61+ years old)

– People who stay in Belarus and continue to do something, allegedly do not meet the expectations or ideas of those people who left, because they believe that nothing can be done in Belarus.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

So far, people who are still active in Belarus have the attitude to interact with the diaspora. That is, not only to maintain good personal relations, but also for joint activities. However, the further away, the weaker this attitude becomes. In addition to objective reasons, it is essential that the partners outside Belarus are unable or unwilling to make sufficient efforts to maximize the security of such interaction and to compensate for those functions that activists in Belarus cannot perform.

– Those who left might somehow think more about security protocols, because it increases our “parallelism”. You don’t want to get into a relationship that’s dangerous for you if your partner controls the information and somehow doesn’t think too much about your risks.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– Now there’s no screen to show the real problems in the country. The people from Belarus can no longer speak publicly, and those who have left cannot or do not want to be their voice.

(Belarus, female respondent, 61+ years old)

Another (quasi) objective reason that complicates and destroys communication between Belarusians on both sides of the border is the division based on the possibilities of using information content. Belarusians in Belarus are forced to limit subscriptions and reading of Belarusian independent media and channels in social networks, because almost all of them are recognized as «extremist». Thus, the unity of the information space is destroyed and the groups become more and more incomprehensible to each other.

The cumulative effect of these factors leads to the creation of a gap between the worlds of pro-democracy Belarusians, weakens their communicative and active ties in the country and abroad, and creates tensions between them. However, according to the majority of respondents, the reason for the emotional outburst of mutual criticism and local conflicts between «those who left» and «those who stayed», lies elsewhere.

Very often the cause of misunderstanding and mutual criticism lies in another area. It is psychological pain, frustration that leads to the blocking of primary needs, especially the need for one’s own security and the general predictability of one’s personal future.

– ...It’s embarrassing, like you ran away and they stayed and they’re in the front and you’re hiding in the back... It seems to me that we are constantly making excuses for why we left to those who stayed.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The problem of the people in the country is that it is impossible to do anything. It burns people from within. That is what creates conflict. Because if it is impossible or scary to fight the dragon, then you have to bite someone who is nearby.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

It may seem a paradox, but it looks as if the same conditions of uncertainty and shared pain actually lead to the accumulation of different survival experiences. So far there are different contextual conditions, daily tasks and tools to cope with both challenges and pain.

As a result, we have both untreated trauma on both sides of the border and an ongoing process of re-traumatization that goes on and on.

– We all are surviving here. And Belarus inside is surviving as well.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– ...The trauma of those who left, the pain of those who served their time in prison, the paranoia of those who stayed...

(Poland, respondent, 31-40 years old)

– We're like exposed wires now. And we're sparking. And each of us individually and in the group. And it's not like the pros and cons are attracting each other. No, we push each other further apart.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

That is, according to the Belarusians:

–...There is sheer pain on both sides. You can't do anything about it and you pour it all out on your cohorts (friendlies) because you're insecure and you don't know what to do.

(Poland, respondent, 41-50 years old)

–...I feel sorry for those who left; I also feel sorry for those who stayed. I know that both of them are Belarusians living in an abnormal state.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 51-60 years old)

– It's a purely psychological aspect of disappointment. Everyone has paid their price, it's a high price for everyone, and it's a disappointment, it's so hurtful that we failed and we have to blame someone.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

In addition to the pain that provokes emotional outbursts and conflicts, the respondents identified another strong emotion that complicates relationships «abroad». This is resentment or envy of each other.

– ...The people who left harbor resentment against those who stayed.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 31-40 years old)

– I made up an explanation for myself to justify these endless questions about why I don't leave. They're just jealous because they can't come to Belarus while I can live here.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– ...“those who left” left everything behind, their whole lives. They have to learn a language they don’t need, huddle in rented rooms, move to nowhere, and build their lives from scratch. It really hurts. We are jealous that they still have their lives.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– “You’re fine, you’re gone. And I have to walk these streets every day, see this red-green beauty that makes my eyes bleed”... This is the tension of those who stayed. Because in a way they envy those who could leave.

(Lithuania, respondent, 41-50 years old)

– ...An atmosphere of constant threat and danger. We have much more freedom here. Again travel restrictions, visa problems and almost an iron curtain. And we can travel all over the world.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– It’s mutual jealousy. And both sides don’t like it... Everybody’s looking for ways not to get hurt. And everybody thinks it is easier on the other side of the border.

(Poland, male respondent, 21-31 years old)

It is worth mentioning here the effect that can be defined as the «Instagram phenomenon». This is when people use social networks to create beautiful images of their lives, which paint an ideal picture, sometimes far from the objective state of a person, whether abroad or in Belarus.

– No one posts on social networks that they have to work three jobs to survive.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– Because they have children or parents here, and they had to leave, and we live here, we go to a cafe! There, just a kilometer away, people are being held in the Okrestina prison, and you are sitting in a cafe!

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

Another important point is the mutual underestimation of the situation of the «interlocutors», the lack of knowledge about the problems to be solved on the other side of the border. If this is multiplied by dissatisfaction with the situation, then we get a «situation of unfulfilled expectations».

– You don’t understand the whole situation because you don’t live here, you don’t feel all the pressure.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 31-40 years old)

– There is a certain problem of misunderstanding on the part of those who stayed in Belarus about how hard it is for those who left, how difficult it is to legalize there, to provide for one’s life, to learn languages. There are such oversimplified images that once people left, their lives immediately got better.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– ...Those who left should do something, but they are not doing it, and there are also some expectations that there is not enough resistance there.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 51-60 years old)

– Those who left before and after the war are different. People who left in 2020 think that everyone here still wears white-red-white socks. A new law is passed: why don't you write them letters, it's legal, right? Well, of course it's legal, but geez, it was safe in 2021 and now it's not.

(Belarus, respondent, 31-40 years old)

A combination of objective and subjective factors - the accumulated difference in living conditions, lifestyles, daily challenges, and information consumption, on the one hand, and long-term trauma, pain and frustration, on the other - stimulates a series of accusations from both sides of the Belarusian state border.

From the point of view of the interviewed Belarusians, both from abroad and living in Belarus, the list of these accusations in the model form, i.e. as a reconstruction of the respondents of their subjective communicative experience and their own opinion, has the following components:

– On the part of those who stayed in Belarus:

- Interpretation of leaving the country as a betrayal, because «one can do something for the benefit of Belarus only from Belarus», «if so many people had not left, we would have won long ago».
- Condemnation of the Diaspora for self-centeredness and taking care only of their own affairs, and even a certain «parasitism» on Belarusian issues
- Accusations that people left to do something for Belarus, when in fact they are busy organizing their lives, doing nothing to change the situation in the country, living in safety, having fun, traveling, etc.

– On the part of those who left Belarus:

- Accusations of «betrayal» of the common goal, return to private life, preservation of the usual way of life, namely work, entertainment, etc.
- Accusations of fear, «silence», cessation of political activity, lack of street protests, solidarity, in general, that «you are not doing anything there»
- Accusations of collaboration with the regime, supporting the economy at least by paying taxes, and legitimizing the regime.

It should be noted that the respondents from Poland and Lithuania found it rather difficult to define the demands made by Belarusians from abroad to Belarusians in Belarus. This is also due to the fact that, according to the respondents, these opinions are not very widespread.

– But these are not mainstream thoughts in the diaspora... it may even be a marginal position.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

Similarly, the respondents from Belarus spoke very little about their claims to those who left the country, focusing rather on their own claims. That means that each party is more sensitive to self-accusations and pays more attention to understanding and justifying their own position and choice than to attempts to challenge the position and choices of others.

Also, reflecting on the absurdity of mutual accusations «across the border», the respondents often say that they understand and sympathize with both sides, those who left and those who stayed.

– What hooks me is the rift in the Belarusian soul. It hurts for both sides equally.

(Poland, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– I'm so sorry. I feel sorry for those who left and those who stayed. I realize that both of them are Belarusians living in an abnormal state.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 51-60 years old)

According to the respondents, the main reasons for the growing distance “across the border” are quite different experiences of solving life issues and problems, different challenges and conditions of building individual life strategies inside and outside Belarus. The background of outbreaks of mutual criticism is psychological pain and frustration due to blocking of needs for own security and predictability of the future.

According to the respondents, the composition of mutual accusations “across the border” is quite stereotypical:

- From inside Belarus, there are accusations that Belarusians “left and abandoned the country”, “one can do something for the benefit of Belarus only from Belarus”, and now the diaspora is focused on its own problems
- From outside Belarus, there are accusations of lack of protest activity, support (at least through taxes) of the Belarusian economy, legalization of the regime, and collaborationism.

From both sides, there are claims against each other that people are immersed in their private lives.

SITUATIONAL GENESIS OF THE CONFLICT

The respondents from Belarus assess the overall conflict dynamics as decreasing. According to their subjective experiences and perceptions, explicit, open disputes and conflicts were more characteristic of 2020-2021, another outbreak occurred in 2022, due to the beginning of the active phase of the war in Ukraine. However, since the middle of 2022, clearly controversial discussions on the issue of «left or stayed» have practically disappeared from the public space and, for certain reasons, they occur only sporadically. They see the main reason for this in the fact that during these years a clear system of orientation and acceptance of the situation of choice has developed.

– The public tension on the issue of “leave or stay” is decreasing, all positions have already been formed. It does not exist in the mode of contradiction, but in the mode of difference of realities.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The questions about why you do not leave were often asked before, now there are almost none. People were trying to make their own decision, not to have any doubts, so it was important for them. People in emigration are often looking for confirmation of their choice, so they have to find it somehow, either through questions or sometimes through aggression.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

At the same time, some respondents say that Belarusians who continue to live in Belarus cannot publicly express their point of view, and this fact may be one of the factors of the decrease in the number of public disputes and discussions. Discussions or provocative posts in social networks, which force a person to engage in such communication (when a person is in the mood «cannot keep silent»), create additional risks for him/her.

– In Belarus people are arrested and imprisoned for comments and remarks, so anything that happens on the Internet on a political issue can become a reason for a person to go to jail. So if he/she has to express himself in this way, and he/she cannot do it in any other way than on the Internet, which is visible to everyone, I see a great danger in it.

(Belarus, female respondent, 21-30 years old)

This forced silence, however, does not lead to problem solving and mutual understanding, but to the accumulation of internal tension, frustration, and growing alienation.

Frustration and pain, resentment and envy provoke the existence of a more or less equal background of misunderstanding and tension, which can sometimes spill out, especially in social networks, in posts and comments.

Belarusians abroad assess the general dynamics of this background differently. Thus, some believe that we have already passed the most conflict-prone period, while others say that, on the contrary, tensions «on the other side of the border» will only increase with time.

– ...*These are all the difficulties of the first period, and in fact they are already slowly fading away.*

(Lithuania, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– ...*The tension in the background gradually builds up.*

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

However, all interviewees agreed that localized conflicts, disputes, and mutual accusations in social networks are of a mixed nature. On the one hand, they mostly arise for objective reasons, such as further arrests or other significant events:

– *The outbreaks are due to specific occasions, such as Freedom Day or the anniversary of protests. When memories are exposed, when there is an occasion for reflection and the question arises: “Who is to blame?”*

(Poland, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– *The outbreaks occur when there is a call from outside to take some action inside. With the beginning of the war, this was especially evident when there were calls from abroad to take to the streets as if it were the year 2020. There were a lot of arrests inside and a lot of complaints from the outside about why so few of you came out. It was unbearable.*

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– *All this shitstorm over cases like Nizkiz is a pain.*

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

On the other hand, a very strong factor is the human factor, namely the «work» of specific individuals - bloggers, opinion makers, and even, according to the respondents, professional or semi-professional Internet trolls.

– *There are specific individuals who are the catalysts of the process.*

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

– ...*For some reason, bloggers have taken on the role of spokespeople for public opinion, often talking utter nonsense. Well, the trolls will add to that, of course.*

(Lithuania, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– *It’s terrible when people in the public eye get hysterical or start shitting on each other in public.*

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

Belarusians living abroad are not quite sure whether such topic starters are expressing their «pain» or working off «fees» from the clients of the security agencies. However, respondents from Lithuania are more inclined to the latter option.

According to the respondents from Belarus, the destruction of relations between people, as well as the creation of a negative image of Belarusians as a community are among the negative consequences of conflicts and exchange of mutual claims in social networks. In addition, such conflicts are always convenient for the state propaganda.

– The propaganda is clearly using all our squabbling. They are just rubbing their hands in jubilation, and they are sure to drag everything into their trashy Telegram channels, and to stir it up and chew it over.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– It's obvious that the secret services are using it. They manage the situation themselves and use every opportunity to make it happen, it is by default to their advantage.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

However, if we speak about the real influence of propaganda on the demarcation line between Belarusians «there» and «here», if it exists, it is rather based on the use of other methods:

– ...Those who did not want to go anywhere, and they are also brainwashed by the Belarusian TV, where we are called nothing less than “fleeing”.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– You can see it in the parents who have the TV on in the background and start to doubt our judgment... There is more negativity towards those who have left. Especially from those who seemed to be close to us.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

The overall conflict dynamics in relations between Belarusians abroad and within the country is decreasing; today there is a growing distance and alienation rather than direct conflict between these two groups.

Tensions usually spill over into social media and have a mixed genesis: on the one hand, they are usually caused by some objective events; on the other hand, conflicts are rather artificially inflated by certain personalities.

OPTIONS FOR FUTURE RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS

If we think about what we can and should do in the emerging situation, in a situation of growing demarcation, there are not so many constructive options. In fact, the main suggestion that emerges from the answers of Belarusians abroad to this question is the only one. It is necessary to learn how to treat each other with respect, how to communicate and engage in responsible dialog.

– Belarusian society argues a lot with each other. We have no experience of communication without claims and tricks. We look for different levels of meaning in each sentence and imply the worst. Our first reaction is defense. And as a result, we have our aggression. Suspicion, aggression, and a struggle for power.

(Poland, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– ...We should learn to have a discussion instead of arguing and destroying each other. We should learn to hold a debate that allows us to understand the position of each other, to get closer or not to get closer in something, but just to understand the other person.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

It is important that the dialog does not only take place online.

– It is necessary to bring the activists from Belarus to some joint practices, seminars, general trainings and exchange of experience. More communication. More mutual respect.

(Poland, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– We need to keep in touch, we need to provide premises and opportunities. Both for those who left and want to return, and for those who want to attend some events outside Belarus. We have to stimulate the activity of those who can. We have to look for opportunities and resources.

(Poland, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

The dialog that Belarusians abroad are talking about should be comprehensive and cumulative. There is a need not only for a special platform for a joint dialogue, but also for the accumulation of the senses that were tailored.

– Practices, written strategies, and oral discussions are poorly saved as social networks or Twitter are not suitable for this, and websites are being closed.

(Poland, male respondent, 21-30 years old)

And dialogue should certainly not only be valuable in itself, but should bear fruit both in terms of mutual understanding and in terms of developing a certain shared vision of a common future.

– ...there should be unity, with a common purpose to communicate and to develop a common approach.

(Poland, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The one who will offer people at least some certainty, will unite the society.

(Lithuania, male respondent, 31-40 years old)

At the same time, unfortunately, the respondents are not very optimistic about the real possibilities of leveling the difference that is now manifested on both sides of the border.

– Neither side now has the ability to smooth out the reality.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– Nothing can be done here until the environment changes.

(Lithuania, female respondent, 51-60 years old)

– It's a little bit too early to take any reconciliation steps. Except on a personal level.

(Poland, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

As for the possible catastrophic consequences of the current tensions between those who left and those who stayed in Belarus, Belarusians abroad are more optimistic:

– My forecast for the relationship after the return is positive... In general, the joy of a Belarusian's return will outweigh the perception of his/her departure.

(Poland, male respondent, under 30 years old)

– In any case, there will be tension upon return. It depends very much on the time, on the number of years, how strong the tension will be. If it is today or tomorrow, it will be minimal. On the other hand, the fact that we are tolerant may help us to get used to it.

(Poland, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– I believe in intelligence and in those young people who took off their shoes and cleaned up after themselves during the marches.

(Poland, female respondent, 61+ years old)

The respondents from Belarus are very careful in their predictions about the situation with the return of those Belarusians who left the country. And it is not about the conflict and tension between them and those who remain in the country, that is, the pro-democratic part of the society. Here the forecasts are quite optimistic.

– All these contradictions are dangerous at the moment, but if necessary, when the global situation somehow stabilizes, we will unite.

(Belarus, female respondent, 31-40 years old)

– I think it's our information bubble of about those who have left and those who are here, and it will burst when we gather together. There's a lot more of that in the virtual world.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

But Belarus itself is changing. According to the activists inside the country, people who want to return will therefore have to adapt to the new situation, to the conditions of the real Belarus, not the one that exists now in their imagination. Certainly, one of the main factors here is time.

– The distance between those who left and those who stayed will obviously grow, and it all depends on how much time passes before “normality” is restored. And the more time passes, the harder it will be to glue it back together. And this way may be so long that it will be impossible to glue them together, as in the situation of West and East Germans.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

Therefore, the respondents see it as their task to maintain interpersonal relations between Belarusians on both sides of the border and to create an adequate picture of what is happening in the country for those who want to return.

In terms of ways to reduce tensions and preserve the integrity of the community of Belarusians who are still determined to change the country, the perceptions of respondents from Belarus focus on two main directions.

The first is to maintain interpersonal relationships and communicate in various ways.

– Conflict resolution happens through face-to-face meetings. When people are in live contact, on different platforms, it is easier for them to understand each other, the guesswork disappears when a person is talking to you.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– Some form of communication is required. Of course, there are security issues here, and simple steps like a conference for both sides will not solve them. But some kind of interaction is needed, perhaps in different forms. However, I do not see that anyone is concerned about these issues today.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

The second is special work in the sphere of information, changing the discourse of the mass media, involving opinion leaders and moral authorities in the elimination of contradictions and local conflicts among Belarusians.

– The task of the mass media is to strengthen the component of reflective texts, of normal journalism and, of course, to highlight Belarusian culture.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– This means discussing in the media the positions of influential people who can stand above the processes and look at them from above, or from the outside, or as a whole, or in context. Such moral and educational activities.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– And the media, for sure. That's why Life-Malina makes such long stories with those who have left, when people can comprehensively tell the whole situation, the whole story. The people who stayed don't have the opportunity to reveal their situation. If you could tell why you're living here, what you're doing, why you think it's important and necessary, there would probably be more balance in these positions. Yes, there are security issues here, but you can come up with something if you want to.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

– The mass media have created such a situation, where every person who has left is perceived as a direct heir of Kastus Kalinouski, so let them solve it.

(Belarus, male respondent, 41-50 years old)

– Many broadcasts of Belarusian mass media seem already detached from Belarus, some of them often use Polish words to show how well they have assimilated. Something should be done to make Belarusians in Belarus feel involved in what is happening abroad. Take away the derogatory tone when talking about Belarusians in Belarus, it has become very common. You might think it's about the supporters of the current government (ябацькі), but it's as if it affects everyone. And I'm here and I feel like it's about me too.

(Belarus, female respondent, 41-50 years old)

The respondents see the measures taken to counteract the conflict as exercises in responsible dialogue, establishing links (informational, communicative, personal) “across borders” and developing joint strategies for the future. And special media work aimed at eliminating contradictions and highlighting life in Belarus.

At the same time, the level of optimism about the effectiveness of such instruments is relatively low. However, there is a rather positive vision of the prospects of mutual understanding among Belarusians in case those who left return to their homeland.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

The part of the protest movement of 2020-2021 that retains the attitude of bringing about changes in Belarus today is united, on the one hand, by the initial value base of opposition to dictatorship and rejection of violence, and, on the other hand, by new challenges: the need to release political prisoners, the threat of the takeover of Belarus, the war between Russia and Ukraine.

At the same time, the prolonged period of dictatorship in the country, the lack of clear perspectives and strategies, the deterioration of the situation both within the country and in the broader regional context lead to the dilution of the sense of unity, frustration and burnout of the people, the actualization of accumulated contradictions and the emergence of new demarcation lines within the community that was once (albeit situationally) based on solidarity. Conflicts arise on the basis of reflection on the reasons for the defeat of the protest movement in 2020, on ideological grounds and adherence to certain political forces or leaders, on the language issue, on the defense of the correctness of certain methods of fighting the regime, on the release of political prisoners, etc.

One of the basic and stable lines of demarcation is the division of Belarusians into those who left Belarus and those who live within the country.

Initially, this division was not only geographical. At first it was perceived as a temporary one that would soon disappear, but the more uncertain the time perspectives of the political changes in the country are, the more stable the demarcation line between Belarusians on both sides of the geographical border becomes.

At the same time, in 2020-2021, the discussion about leaving Belarus or staying in the country was of a fundamental, widespread and often conflict nature. From about the middle of 2022, this issue ceased to be a conflict factor, except for sporadic outbursts in social networks. On both sides there is an acceptance of the situation and the presence of different individual choices within it. However, the distance between the two groups is growing. And this is one of the challenges that the Belarusian democratic movement is facing today and to which we need to find a solution.

The main factors increasing the distance between Belarusians from inside and outside the country are:

- A growing difference in lifestyles and features of everyday life, individual challenges and problems faced by Belarusians on both sides of the Belarusian border.
- A complex of psychological factors: individual and collective traumatic experiences, pain, guilt, fear for oneself and others
- Weakening up to the point of disappearance of operational ties and destruction of similarity of political agenda;
- Lack of a common “screen” and information space. As a result, each group has its own image of “Belarus” and its own image of “abroad”
- Lack of a clear perspective for the future and medium-term benchmarks.

Maintaining ties between Belarusians inside and outside Belarus is a complex and difficult task. It takes into account both the difficult living and working conditions of the Belarusian diaspora and the nature and level of repression inside the country. Based on this study, we can outline several possible courses of action hoping that they will stimulate discussion and further search for practical steps to address this problem:

- To avoid generalizations in assessments (both in interpersonal and public communication), to reject both the stigmatization and the glorification of choice in favor of one decision or another (to leave or not to leave) in general terms; to respect the presumption of people's rationality and their right to make decisions about their lives. To promote norms of dialogue, mutual respect, and responsibility in communication.
- To take into account the collective trauma of Belarusians, which, despite having a common initial genesis (actual or potential encounter with the repressive machine of the Belarusian regime), differs significantly in the directions and peculiarities of the subsequent retrotraumatization ("trauma of the refugee", "trauma of the abandoned").
- To maintain interpersonal contacts and create spaces for communication both online and offline. To find appropriate forms that can allow such communication while respecting the necessary security protocols.
- To overcome the "asymmetry of publicity". The problem of the impossibility to publicly express one's opinion, position, expose the processes taking place in the country is not only and mostly not that much a problem of Belarusians inside the country. The lack of such publicity creates a fundamentally false perception of the situation in the country for all those interested in change. Thanks to the special non-public work with Belarusians inside the country, Belarusians abroad can be their "voice", form the agenda taking into account their views and knowledge about what is going on in the country. Thanks to it, Belarusians in Belarus and abroad could better understand the current state of affairs in the country, better orient themselves on the opportunities and develop more appropriate strategies of activity.
- To conduct special information and media work aimed at creating a common semantic space, analyzing the situation, developing or supporting common grounds for preserving unity and identity, involving opinion leaders and moral authorities in the discussion of acute or painful issues.
- To unconditionally consider the safety of Belarusians in the activities of various actors - from the organizers of various events represented by public organizations to journalists and media editors.

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(Unfortunately, for security reasons, not all authors of the study are listed.)



The public institution **Formula of Humanity** was registered in Vilnius on April 6, 2023 with the aim of promoting reconciliation and unification of post-conflict communities through interaction with bearers of various cultures of memory.

The organization's activities consist of discussion, information, cultural and other activities aimed at educating a wide range of citizens about public history, politics and human rights, promoting democratic values among target groups, taking responsibility for what happens in their country and region, consolidating democratically minded people and people who consider themselves «out of politics», exposing the propaganda of dictatorial regimes and acquiring skills to counter it, as well as reconciliation among different groups of people.

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