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Poland - Belarus Public Diplomacy [1]

One of the more poorly understood aspects of public diplomacy is that it is not a tool for short-term policy goals. Public diplomacy is a tool with long-term benefits that are often difficult to measure. Public diplomacy is of limited value in short-term crisis situations. However, during a prolonged struggle, such as the Cold War, a sustained public diplomacy program can have profound effects. One public diplomacy program that is currently in play that bears watching is Poland's efforts with respects to its totalitarian neighbor of Belarus. Poland has taken the lead in Europe in supporting the Belarussian opposition and has sponsored an international donors conference this past February 2nd in Warsaw. Poland pledged $14million in aid related to Belarus at the conference.

Poland's ethnic ties to Belarus gives its public diplomacy efforts a special credibility. Many Belarussians have blood and family ties to Poland and vice versa. While the U.S. and western European nations continue to reach out to the Belarussian public, Poland can play an intermediary role that other nations can not. Warsaw has also become a safe haven for Belarussians who seek a more open society while staying close to home.

As the political situation in Belarus continues to deteriorate Poland has taken the lead in helping to shape a unified western response to the crisis. However, Poland began using public diplomacy as a tool to assist the Belarussian public in earlier years. Poland's programs fall into three categories – education programs, media, and support for Belarussian civil society.

Poland now waives visa fees for Belarussian students and permits them to stay after they finish their education on a case-by-case basis. In 2006 Poland instituted the Kastus Kalinowski program for Belarussian students who had been expelled from their schools for political activities. Kalinowski students are able to attend classes at several participating Polish universities. In its first year over 200 students were enrolled in the program. The first students are now graduating. The difficulties many such exchange programs often face is that students often don't return to their native countries. However, some Kalinowski students are reportedly returning to Belarus to play roles in the opposition and others are taking jobs in business and elsewhere. They are facing difficulties, however, because western education is frowned upon and can be considered grounds for denying someone a job. This is the challenge that Kalinowski students have to contend with upon returning to Belarus. On the other hand, the desire to return and be close to their families is an incentive to return. The Polish government also helps fund Belarussian students who wish to attend the European Humanities University (EHU) in Vilnius, Lithuania, which has programs sponsored by American and European NGOs. Some Belarussian students are taking EHU classes online in a program that the Polish government supports. This enables them to get a higher education without ever having to leave Belarus.

Over half the funds Poland spends on public diplomacy projects related to Belarus goes to media projects. Poland supports three media outlets that broadcast to Belarus – Belsat TV,

Radio Racja and European Radio for Belarus. European Radio for Belarus, which broadcasts from Warsaw, is oriented towards young people, but it has the widest audience. Radio Racja was created in 1999 by the U.S., but went off the air in 2002. It was re-activated in 2006 with funding from the Polish Foreign Ministry and now broadcasts 24 hours. Radio Racja is trying to extend its frequency. A source in Belarus told me that it is difficult to get Radio Racja in Brest. The source also indicated that taxi drivers in Brest and Grodno often listen to European Radio for Belarus. Radio Racja, on the other hand, attracts mostly the young and opposition activists. Belsat TV, which started operations in 2007, is the largest recipient of Polish funds for media. There is some discrepancy as to the size of Belsat TV's audience. Belsat claims 720,000 viewers, but Belarussian activists say that 150,000 to 250,000 is more likely. There are still other media projects that are not backed by Poland such as ARU1, which can be found online at aru1.tv. The media outlets, however, are not being used as tools with which to mobilize the opposition, which is undoubtedly a good thing when one considers the tragic history of Radio Free Europe broadcasts to Hungary in 1956. The opposition relies primarily on blogs and websites to mobilize supporters. The media outlets serve mainly as a source of credible news and information.

It is difficult to gauge exactly what Poland is doing with respects to supporting Belarussian civil society because of the sensitivities surrounding the situation. It is illegal for NGOs to take foreign funding in Belarus. However, Poland is funding websites and printed material as well as providing material assistance to the families of political prisoners.

One casualty of the Polish public diplomacy efforts has been ethnic Polish organizations in Belarus. The Polish government helps to fund organizations dedicated to supporting Polish culture and Polish minorities worldwide. Belarus, which has a large ethnic Polish minority, has not been an exception. Ethnic Polish organizations in Belarus that have accepted Polish government funds have become the victims of harassment and intimidation that have include property seizures and arrests of employees.

The political situation in Belarus continues to be tense. Time will tell what role Poland's public diplomacy efforts will play in shaping Belarussian society. Undoubtedly, though, Belarussians who were able to earn an education, speak-out against injustice, or simply stay afloat while family members are in prison will remember the assistance that Poland provided in their time of need.