

The Poland–Belarus Relationship: Geopolitics Gave New Impetus, but no Breakthrough

Andrei Yeliseyeu

The relationship between Poland and Belarus has had good and bad times during the last 26 years. Periodically Warsaw played an important intermediary role in improving EU–Belarus relations. In other periods of time, however, the bilateral relationship was marked with animosity and reciprocal reproaches. From 2011–2013 Poland–Belarus relations were arguably at their lowest point. The annexation of Crimea and Russia’s aggressive policy in eastern Ukraine gave the go-ahead to a gradual EU–Belarus rapprochement, and the intensification of contact between Poland and Belarus.

While Belarus remains Russia’s closest military and political ally, it still lacks formal contractual relations with the EU and continues pursuing repressive and undemocratic domestic policies.

The country shares extensive historic and cultural heritage with Poland. Its geographical proximity and mediatory role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, economic stagnation in Russia and the latter’s more aggressive foreign policy are important factors pushing Belarus in a European direction — at least to some extent Belarus’ relations with Poland as its largest neighbouring EU country can be seen as a litmus test for EU–Belarus relations in general.

Before discussing the most important developments in Poland–Belarus relations that have taken place in recent years, this chapter starts with a brief overview of the political and economic relations between these countries up to 2014. A separate section briefly explains the dispute over the Union of Poles in Belarus, which remains one of the most controversial issues in their relations. Furthermore, the study looks at important aspects of mobility between the two countries, namely short-term travel and long-term travel arrangements including the Polish Cards, and delays with a local border traffic regime.

Ups and Downs in Poland–Belarus Relations Since the 1990s

Poland–Belarus relations began formally on 27 December 1991, the day when Warsaw recognized Belarus' independence. The Treaty on Good-Neighbourly Relations signed in June 1992 became a legal basis for bilateral relations. During the first part of the 1990s both countries were busy with their domestic political and economic issues, while in the second part of the decade Poland invested most of its foreign policy efforts on integration into the EU and NATO, while Belarus sought deeper relations with Russia.

As a candidate country to the EU and later as a full EU member, Poland was part of a series of diplomatic conflicts between the EU and Belarus, starting from July 1998. This is when the EU introduced visa sanctions against Belarusian officials for the first time. In the following two decades sanctions were introduced and expanded a number of times before being suspended and lifted time and again. In addition to periods of cooled EU–Belarus relations, since 1996 occasional outbreaks of disputes between Poland–Belarus over the issue of the Union of Poles occurred.

In response to growing repressions against democratic activists and independent media in Belarus, in 2006–2007 the Polish government, formed by the conservative Law and Justice political party, initiated a number of projects assisting Belarus' civil society. The Kalinowki Scholarship program offered grants to Belarusian democratic activists who faced political repressions in Belarus. A satellite *Belsat* TV broadcasting into Belarus from Poland was established. *Belsat* was supposed to provide the Belarusian population with an important alternative to dominant state-run television programming in the country. So far, Poland has invested more than 40 million USD into *Belsat*. Furthermore, Poland has provided financial assistance to other independent media (e.g., *Radio Racyja*, *European Radio for Belarus*) and Belarusian NGOs.

In 2008, Poland along with Sweden initiated the European Union's Eastern Partnership Program. The project was intended to strengthen the economic and political ties of six eastern European countries, including Belarus, with the EU. That same year the Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski paid an official visit to Belarus, followed by Polish Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlik's visit in 2009. In its pursuit of closer Belarus' engagement from 2008–2010, Warsaw had to partly compromise its position concerning the issue of the Union of Poles in Belarus. One outbreak of conflict surrounding the Union of Poles occurred in February 2010 amid a period of EU–Belarus rapprochement. Although it cooled down after the Polish presidential plane crash in April 2010, this tragedy did not bring a breakthrough for bilateral relations.

The lowest point in Poland–Belarus relations followed the violent crackdown on peaceful protesters, democratic opposition and civil society in the aftermath of the 2010 Belarus' presidential election. In February 2012, when reacting to

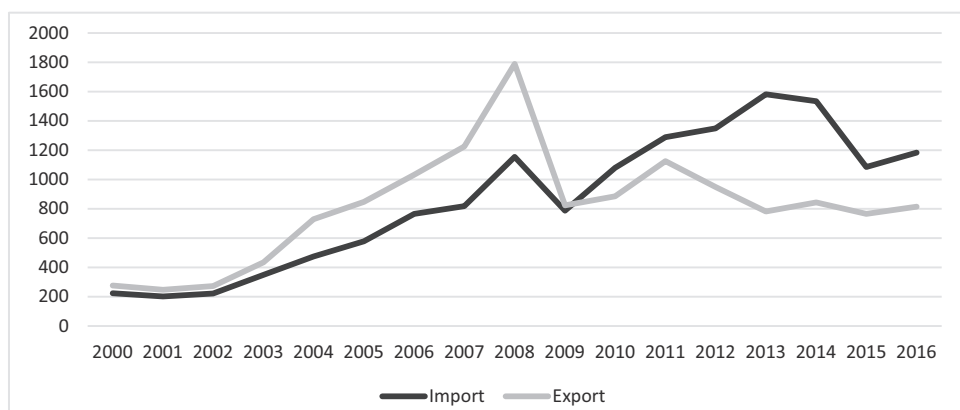
broadening sanctions by the EU, Polish ambassador Leszek Szerepka and EU ambassador Maira Mora were expelled from Minsk. Throughout 2011–2012 Belarusian state media attacked Poland’s authorities and its eastern policy. Media reports went as far as saying that Polish authorities allegedly financed militants aimed at destabilizing Belarus and overthrowing Lukashenka. Furthermore, in 2011 Poland discredited itself in the eyes of Belarus’ civil society by unintentionally passing on sensitive financial information concerning Belarusian human rights defender Ales Bialacki to Minsk.

Despite the hard line taken by the EU and Poland towards Belarusian authorities in particular, from 2006–2008 and 2011–2014 there has been no progress with Belarus’ democratisation. In 2008 and 2015 Belarusian authorities released political prisoners as required by the EU. However, neither the electoral process nor the overall human rights’ situation in the country improved. The Western coercive diplomacy and sanctions policy turned out to be only partially successful, due to limited EU leverage over Belarus, and consistent Russian political and economic support.

As for Poland–Belarus trade relations, they have not been affected by the occasional EU sanctions which targeted specific individuals and companies rather than economic sectors or state enterprises. The lion’s share of Belarus’ export to Poland consists of mineral and chemical products, wood and ferrous metals. Main Belarusian imports from Poland are agricultural products, machinery and equipment, as well as metals and chemicals.

Poland is among Belarus’ largest trade partners. As seen in Graph No. 1, up until 2008 Belarusian exports to Poland exceeded imports, but since that year an opposite trend persists. In fact, the volume of a negative trade balance

Graph No. 1. Belarus–Poland trade in 2000–2016.



Author’s compilation based on Belarusian Statistics Committee data.

with Poland is much larger, given that Belarusians spend hundreds of millions of dollars (more than 700 million USD in 2014) on consumer goods annually in Poland, and these expenses are not counted in official trade statistics.

Furthermore, a decrease in Polish imports to Belarus in 2015–2016 was not as steep as official statistics indicate. In order to bypass the Russian embargo, part of Poland's agricultural products came to Belarus under the guise of other states' producers. As a closer analysis of trade statistics suggests, in 2015 some Polish imports were counted in Belarusian statistics in favour of Ecuador, Morocco and Turkey, while in 2016 trade statistics were artificially distorted, favouring — only on paper — a number of West and Central African countries, including Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea and Burkina Faso.

The Unresolved Dispute over the Union of Poles in Belarus

The Polish minority in Belarus is composed of 295,000 people according to the 2009 Belarus census, while Belarusian ethnicity was declared by 47,000 citizens of Poland in 2011. Both minorities are concentrated in the Poland–Belarus borderland and are for the most part well integrated into local societies.

According to the 2009 Belarusian census, 58 percent and 34 percent of the Polish minority representatives named Belarusian and Russian as their mother tongues, respectively, while only 5 percent opted for Polish.¹ There are two secondary schools with Polish as language of instruction (in Hrodna and Vaŭkavysk) and a dozen other secondary educational institutions with Polish as an occasional subject.² However, Polish is rarely spoken at home among the Polish minority in Belarus. When asked what language they speak at home, less than 2 percent spoke Polish, while Belarusian and Russian were selected by 41 percent and 51 percent of ethnic Poles, respectively.³ Interestingly, Belarusian as a language of domestic communication was declared by most Belarusian minority members in Poland.

While Poland has pursued a reasonably sustainable coherent diaspora policy, Belarus has been mostly inactive in this regard. A good example of Poland's meaningful assistance to its diaspora is the Law on the Polish Card. This 2007

¹ Belarus National Census 2009. Population by ethnicity and mother tongue, *Belarusian Statistical Committee*, accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.8-0.pdf.

² UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, Belarus, CERD/C/BLR/18-19, 15 November 2012, p. 16, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/51ed02304.html>.

³ Belarus National Census 2009. Population by ethnicity and languages spoken at home, *Belarusian Statistical Committee*, accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.9-0.pdf.

legislation gave Polish minority members in Belarus, as well as in other post-Soviet countries, a number of important benefits. In contrast to Poland, any Belarusian diaspora policy is largely incoherent and selective. The law *On Belarusians living abroad*, which was adopted as late as 2014, was met with disappointment by Belarusian diaspora as their aspirations, such as cheaper or free Belarusian visas, were not taken into account.⁴

The Union of Poles in Belarus, which came into existence in June 1990, has been active in defending cultural rights and promoting the Polish culture in Belarus. Thanks to its endeavors, sixteen centers of Polish culture were set up across the country, and the newspaper *Głos z nad Niemna*'s print-run reached as much as 12,000 copies at one point. However, since the mid-1990s the organization's activities became restricted in Belarus.

As Tadeusz Gawin, who chaired the Union of Poles from 1990–2000, wrote in his book: in 1995 a number of high Belarusian officials benevolent to the Union lost their offices. That same year the first attempts by the Belarusian KGB to recruit members of organizations took place.⁵ From this time on, Gawin describes himself being under the constant pressure of Belarusian security bodies. A state ban on the opening of a Polish school at the Belarusian city of Navahradak in 1996 was the first in a series of scandals in relations between Belarusian authorities and the Union of Poles.

In 2005, a year after the referendum in Belarus took place on the prolongation of presidential terms, the European Union imposed sanctions against a number of Belarusian officials and repressions against the Union of Poles intensified. The organization split in two, largely a result of deliberate actions from Belarusian state bodies. The Belarusian Ministry of Justice did not recognize the newly elected Union's Chairman Anzhalika Borys (Andżelika Borys, in Polish), which led to her and her followers secession from the Union, recognized later by the authorities.

In June 2005 the then secretary of the Polish Embassy, Marek Bućko, was expelled from Belarus. The following month the Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs ordered the Director of the Consular Department, Andrzej Buczak, to leave the country. In turn, Poland recalled its ambassador from Belarus and sent a few diplomatic notes protesting events around the Union of Poles.⁶

Ever since, two Union of Poles has functioned in Belarus; one is recognized by the Belarusian state and registered by the Ministry of Justice, and the other

⁴ Andrei Yeliseyeu, "Emigration and diaspora policies in Belarus", INTERACT Research Report 2014/27, accessed April 25, 2017, https://www.academia.edu/13691443/Emigration_and_diaspora_policies_in_Belarus

⁵ Tadeusz Gawin, "Związek Polaków na Białorusi. Historia niszczenia niezależności 1988–2005", Białystok, 2006, 88.

⁶ Ryszard Zięba, "Główne kierunki polityki zagranicznej Polski po zimnej wojnie", Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, 2010, 238–239.

is not. Members of the Union not recognized by the Belarusian state have found their activities under increased limitations and repression. They have been persistently attacked in Belarusian state media and occasionally harassed by law enforcement agencies and security bodies. According to the Criminal Code of Belarus, participants of unregistered organizations can be punished with three years' imprisonment.

A new escalation around the Unions of Poles emerged in January 2010 after the election of a new Union of Poles chairman in the Belarus' town of Ivianiec. It brought victory to Tereza Sobal who was a member of the unregistered Union of Poles in Belarus. Dissatisfied with the results of the election, Belarusian authorities initiated a capture of the Polish cultural centre in Ivianiec in the registered Union's favour.

On 9 February 2010 Polish Ambassador Henryk Litwin was called into Warsaw for consultations. Four days later, during his visit, Belarusian Foreign Minister Sergei Martynov was handed a letter by Polish President Kaczynski, which was addressed to his Belarusian counterpart. In this letter Lukashenka was asked to solve the problem surrounding the Union of Poles based on democratic principles. The letter remained unanswered and no amicable solution was proposed by Belarus.

On 17 February the Belarusian court ruled that the cultural centre was to become a property of the registered Union. That same day the Polish parliament passed a resolution condemning Belarus' actions and calling for personal sanctions. A few days later the Polish president hosted Borys as a sign of support to the Union of Poles that is unrecognized by Belarus. Tensions between the countries over the Union of Poles deescalated somewhat after the April 2010 plane crash that killed the Polish President Lech Kaczynski and his wife.

Despite sustained, numerous attempts by Warsaw to influence Minsk to change its attitude to the unrecognized Union of Poles, to date no breakthrough has taken place. The organization remains unregistered, and access to the Polish cultural centres for its members remains restricted. In December 2016, Borys was elected a head of the unregistered Union of Poles anew, which brought a *déjà vu* effect to the 2005 state of things.

Relations between the *Belarusian minority in Poland* and Polish authorities have been much more positive, although not perfect. They were overshadowed by the criminal proceedings against eleven members of the Editorial Board of *Niwa Weekly* (a newspaper for Belarusians in Poland), including some prominent figures of the Belarusian minority of Poland. The process was initiated in 2003 after the Supreme Control Chamber of Poland reported certain violations by *Niwa*, mostly related to legislation on book-keeping. Although in 2006 the trial finally found all *Niwa* editorial members not guilty, the persecution caused damage to the image and cultural activities of Belarusian minority organizations

in Poland. Criminal charges also impaired political activities of Belarusian minority representatives at a regional level. It was suggested that prosecution became possible — at least to some extent — because of the personal negative attitudes of some Polish law-enforcement officials towards representatives of national minorities.⁷

Migration and Visa Relations between Poland and Belarus

In October 2003, on the eve of entering the EU, Poland introduced short-term national visas for the citizens of neighbouring eastern states, including Belarus. The visa requirements were quite simple and visa fees for Belarusians were rather low. However, four year later when Poland was accessing the Schengen zone, the country had to revoke national legislation regulating short-term entries for foreigners. Instead, in December 2007 Polish consulates started issuing Schengen visas, which brought a manifold increase in visa fees. As long as Belarus did not have — and still does not — a visa facilitation agreement with the EU, a standard fee for a Schengen visa increased to EUR 60.⁸ Furthermore, visa procedures also became more cumbersome than before.

This resulted in an almost four times decrease in visas issued by Polish consulates in 2008 against previous year: from 271,000 to 74,000 visas. As a result, in 2008 the number of border-crossings at the Poland–Belarus border section dropped below the level registered in 1990, which prompted talk of a ‘true collapse of the bilateral movement of persons.’⁹ It was only in 2012 the numbers of short-term visas issued by Polish consulates in Belarus surpassed the 2007 visa statistics.

Two factors affected the performance of Polish consulates in Belarus. First, for years Belarus did not allow the expansion of Poland’s consular staff. Second, many thousands of Belarusians had to overpay visa intermediaries because of persistent hackers’ manipulations with online registrations for visa applications at the Polish consulate’s web pages. The latter problem was partly solved by the establishment of authorized visa centres across Belarus in 2016. They facilitate access to visa procedures for applicants for an additional fee of EUR 15.

⁷ Study of the problems of Belarus–Poland borderland in the context of the EU enlargement, pp. 128–129, accessed April 25, 2017, https://spring96.org/files/book/en/Pamiezza_en.pdf.

⁸ As Ukraine and Russia had functioning visa facilitation agreements with the EU by 2008, a standard fee for a Schengen visa for their nationals stood at EUR 35.

⁹ Tomasz Komornicki, “Flows of persons and goods across the Polish segment of the outer boundary of the European Union — results of a research project”, in Tomasz Komornicki et al. (ed.), *European Union: External and Internal Borders, Interactions and Networks*, Vol. 20 of Europa XXI, Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw, 2010, 13.

Despite these problems, Poland issues a high share of visas (45 percent in 2016) in the total numbers of Schengen visas given in Belarus. A good performance by Polish consulates makes Belarus fifth in the world (after Russia, China, Ukraine, and Turkey) in terms of absolute numbers of Schengen visas and first in terms of Schengen visas per capita. Furthermore, Polish consulates in Belarus are known for particularly low levels of visa refusals and for the largest share of multiple-entry Schengen visas among other EU countries' consular bodies in the country.

While visa procedures for Belarusian travellers to Poland have become much more costly and complicated in the last decade, a number of facilitations in travelling to Belarus were opened for nationals of Poland, as well as other Western countries in recent years. These visa-free options, since June 2015, include entry to the Belarusian section of the Bialovezha National Park for up to three days and to the tourism and recreation park Augustow Canal at the Poland–Lithuania–Belarus borderland, as well as to the Hrodna city and its surrounding area for up to five days, from October 2016. Furthermore, since February 2017 nationals of 80 countries, including all EU Member States, can come to Belarus visa-free through the Minsk airport for up to 5 days. Obviously arrival by plane through Minsk is not a preferred option for many Poles who have a reason to visit Belarus. However, taken that two-way plane ticket from Warsaw to Minsk can be bought in advance for around EUR 100, this seems to allow a significant ease of travel for a section of Polish nationals who plan on paying only a short visit to Belarus.

As for labour migration and long-term travel, Poland is the most popular destination country for Belarusian migrants after Russia. More recently Poland has facilitated access to its labour market and to its higher education system, and has simplified procedures for obtaining citizenship for some categories of Belarusians. As a consequence, the country has become a more popular destination for both temporary labour migrants and permanent immigrants from Belarus.¹⁰ Economic stagnation in Russia has pushed thousands of Belarusian labour migrants to reorient towards Poland. Poland is interested in recruiting more Belarusian seasonal workers, the Polish ambassador to Belarus acknowledged in November 2016.¹¹ The number of Belarusians who work in Poland under the simplified temporary employment scheme is likely to grow in coming years.

As a result of 1921's Peace of Riga, present-day Belarus was divided between Soviet Russia and Poland. Belarus reunited in 1939 under the Soviet Union after the start of WWII. According to 2008 Polish legislation, Belarusians with

¹⁰ Andrei Yelisseyeu, "Migration between the EU, Visegrad Countries and Belarus: The Present Situation and the Possible Future", in *Forecasting Migration between the EU, V4 and Eastern Europe. Impact of Visa Abolition (2014)*, 199–200.

¹¹ Maryna Nosava, "Poland interested to recruit more Belarusian workers", BelaPAN news agency, 9 November 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, http://belapan.com/archive/2016/11/09/en_091111144b/.

a command of Polish whose two great grandparents had either Polish ethnicity or Polish citizenship are qualified for the so-called Polish Card. This document, *inter alia*, authorises its holders to seek employment in Poland without a work permit, to carry out economic activity in Poland on the same basis as Polish citizens and, since May 2014, to easily obtain a permanent residence permit. Furthermore, since September 2016, Polish Card holders settling in Poland can acquire Polish citizenship within a year. Since January 2017 those people are entitled to financial assistance during the first nine months of residence in Poland.¹²

Polish Cards have become a rather effective tool of Poland's soft power among Belarus' population. About 75,000 Polish Cards had been issued for Belarusians by mid-2016. In many cases applicants applying for a Polish Card are not Polish minority members who seek a stronger bond with a historic motherland, but persons with solely practical considerations. The actual reasons for many Belarusians applying for Polish Cards include facilitation of their employment in Poland, getting a state education scholarship or a way to receive a free long-term national Polish visa which allows travelling across the Schengen zone.

In 2011 the Belarusian Constitutional Court delivered a decision which says that the respective Polish law goes against the principles of international law and violates a number of international and bilateral agreements.¹³ According to later amendments to the Belarusian law "On state service", officials are not allowed to be in possession of Polish Cards and similar documents issued by other foreign countries. Failure to observe this norm is a ground for discharge from office. However, these legal counter measures by Belarus did not affect the functioning of Polish consulates and the numbers of Polish Cards among Belarusian nationals to continue growing.

Another important although still inactive mobility tool between Poland and Belarus is local border traffic (LBT). The 2006 EU Regulation makes it possible for EU countries to conclude agreements with neighbouring third states on a visa-free land border-crossing regime for border residents (a 30–50 km zone on both sides of the border). Belarus has blocked LBT agreements with Poland and Lithuania for the last seven years. Although these were signed and ratified back in 2010, in each of the two cases Belarus stopped short of taking the final necessary step, namely, sending a diplomatic note indicating readiness to launch the agreement. At the same time Belarus has a functioning LBT agreement with Latvia and this has been since 2012. Notably, the Latvia–Belarus borderland is much less populous than Poland–Belarus and Lithuania–Belarus border areas.

¹² Polish Card. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland, accessed April 25, 2017, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/foreign_policy/polish_diaspora/card_of_the_pole/.

¹³ Decision of the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Belarus on 7 April 2011 № II-258/2011, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.kc.gov.by/main.aspx?guid=23203>.

Belarusian authorities' unwillingness to facilitate travelling for hundreds of thousands of Belarusian border residents into Poland's and Lithuania's border areas is for political and economic reasons.¹⁴ During 2011–2013 political relations between Belarus and Poland, as well as Belarus and Lithuania were very cold as both EU countries strongly supported the EU sanctions policy. Except for a special technical reason once mentioned by Belarus, which was the alleged absence of special printers for LBT permits, political tensions were repeatedly cited by Belarusian officials as a barrier to introducing LBT regimes. Supposedly, Belarusian authorities also have a concern that a greater awareness among Belarusians of their western neighbours' living standards would enhance pro-European sentiments and cause a higher level of distrust in economic and political policies in Belarus.

Belarusian officials repeatedly expressed their discontent over frequent shopping of Belarusians abroad. A few years ago Alyaksandr Lukashenka even voiced an idea to impose an exit tax on Belarusians travelling abroad worth 100 USD. Admittedly, facilitated mobility of border residents would increase purchases of consumer goods in Poland and Lithuania, which would further worsen Belarus' balance of payments. For instance, in 2014 alone, Polish estimations show Belarusians spent about EUR 730 million in Poland on consumer goods not registered in customs declarations. In 2015–2016 the figure went down because of the economic downturn in Belarus and decreased purchasing ability of its population.

Lately the Belarusian side has cited an underdeveloped border infrastructure as the actual reason for continued delay with launching long-awaited LBT agreements. According to the article published in the newspaper "*Belarus today*" by Leonid Maltsev, the Head of the State Border Committee, "Preliminary calculations show that about a trillion of [old] Belarusian roubles (which is around 50 million USD — note) are needed for the full-scale functioning of LBT agreements with our neighbours".¹⁵ Thereby, of late Belarusian authorities have come up with a variety of arguments supporting their reluctance to introduce a visa-free regime for border residents. Despite a big part of residents on both sides of the border being enthusiastic about LBT, political and economic considerations by Belarus' authorities make the prospects of these agreements unclear.

¹⁴ Andrei Yeliseyev, "Keeping the door ajar. Local border traffic regimes on the EU's eastern borders", Finnish Institute of International Affairs, FIIA Report 41, 2014, 70–74, accessed April 25, 2017, www.fia.fi/assets/publications/FIIA_Report_41_web.pdf.

¹⁵ Leonid Maltsev, "Big steps of local border traffic" (in Russian), Советская Белоруссия № 5 (24887), 13 января 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.sb.by/obshchestvo/article/bolshie-shagi-malogo-prigranichnogo-dvizheniya.html>.

Post-Crimea: Geopolitical Considerations Push for Improved Relations

Mindful of the aggressive Russian policy in Ukraine, Belarus sees closer relations with the EU as a tool to decrease the country's political and economic dependence on Russia. In addition, Western sanctions against Russia contributed to its economic stagnation, which in turn provoked a deeper economic downturn in Belarus.¹⁶ Belarus' export promotion program for 2016–2020 has an objective to diversify the country's export so that its third would fall on EU countries by 2020.¹⁷

The EU's and Poland's willingness to reengage with Belarus is based largely on geopolitical reasoning. Taking into account Belarus' intermediary role in the Russia–Ukraine conflict, establishing closer cooperation with Belarus was seen by many as a timely decision serving both sides' interests. Although the EU and Poland remain engaged with Belarusian opposition and the public at large, their approach towards Belarus has lately become more pragmatic.

Poland–Belarus reengagement started with the Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei's visit to Warsaw on 28–29 August 2014. With his Polish counterpart Radoslaw Sikorski and other Polish high officials, Makei discussed the events in Ukraine as well as topics of bilateral relations.¹⁸ Prior to Makei's visit, two symbolic joint events are worth mentioning. First, the session of the Poland–Belarus working group on trade and investments within the Committee on Economic Cooperation, and a business forum for Polish and Belarusian businessmen, took place in Minsk in April 2014. Second, a forum of sister cities in Belarus and Poland was hosted in the Polish city Bialystok in May 2014, after a twelve-year break.

In December 2014 the third meeting of the joint Belarus–Poland Commission on economic cooperation was attended by Polish and Belarusian Deputy Prime Ministers Janusz Piechocinski and Mikhail Rusy. Furthermore, in 2014 bilateral working groups on transport, tourism and energy met, and Polish agriculture minister Marek Sawicki paid a visit to Minsk exploring investment opportunities.

In 2015 development of economic and technical contacts between the two countries continued. Throughout the year new joint business meetings took place, including a business forum on woodworking and the furniture industry, in May,

¹⁶ The year of 2017 is projected to be the third consecutive year of economic decline in Belarus. The country's GDP fell 7 percent since 2014.

¹⁷ Belarus' export promotion program for 2016–2020, approved by the Council of Ministers on 1 August 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.government.by/upload/docs/file/aff83a3fc04eb9c0.PDF>.

¹⁸ On the Working Visit of Mr. Vladimir Makei, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, to Poland. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus, 29 August 2014, accessed April 25, 2017, http://mfa.gov.by/en/press/news_mfa/f9c91d4b9c4a581a.html.

in Minsk. This event was opened by the Polish Deputy Prime Minister Konrad Pawlik, who was appointed as a new Ambassador to Belarus the following March. In December 2015 the Belarusian city of Hrodna hosted a third forum of sister cities in Belarus and Poland. A number of bilateral projects in culture, tourism, ecology, and border infrastructure were supported within three Euro regions (Bug, Neman, Belovezhskaya Pushcha) functioning at the Poland–Belarus borderland. In November 2015 Belarusian KGB passed on documents concerning Polish prisoners of WWII to Poland, which could be seen as a political signal of Belarusian interest for further engagement.¹⁹

Release of the remaining political prisoners in August 2015 by Belarus gave the start to increased political contact between Poland and Belarus. Over 22–23 March 2016, Witold Waszczykowski came to Belarus, which was the first visit of Poland's Foreign Minister to Belarus since 2010. In the course of his visit to Belarus, Waszczykowski visited the town of Vaŭkavysk, the birth place of his mother, met with his Belarusian counterpart Makei and held talks with Alyaksandr Lukashenka. "Nobody is as much interested in independent and stable Belarus as Poland is. I think you do not need yet another unstable state in addition to Ukraine," Lukashenka stated during their talk.²⁰

In his address to parliament in April 2016, Lukashenka made it clear that Belarus is very interested in eventually getting financial benefits from developed political relationships with EU countries: "We have begun a new stage in relations with the West, which I would still call "empty talking"... If we do not develop our relations, we will lose interest in each other after some time. In its relations with the West, Belarus's primary interest is investments and joint ventures".²¹ Volumes of Polish foreign direct investment into the Belarusian economy are quite low. According to Belarusian statistics, in 2015 Polish FDI stocks in Belarus stood at 195 million USD.

On 11–12 October 2016, Belarusian FM Makei paid an official visit to Warsaw in connection with the 25th anniversary of the Declaration on good-neighbourliness, mutual recognition and cooperation between Belarus and Poland.

¹⁹ Polskie Radio, "The Belarusian KGB has provided Polish Internal Security Agency with a document on Polish WWII POWs" (in Polish), 6 November 2015, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.polskieradio.pl/75/921/Artykul/1541436,KGB-Bialorusi-przekazalo-ABW-dokument-o-polskich-jencach-z-II-wojny>.

²⁰ Internet portal of the President of the Republic of Belarus, "Meeting with the Polish Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski" (in Russian), 23 March 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, http://president.gov.by/ru/news_ru/view/vstrecha-s-ministrom-inostrannyx-del-polshi-vitoldom-vaschikovskim-13313/.

²¹ Belarusian Telegraph Agency, "President's address to the Belarusian people and the National assembly" (in Russian), 21 April 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-21-aprelja-obratitsja-s-ezhegodnym-poslaniem-k-belorusskomu-narodu-inationalnomu-sobraniju-190272-2016/>.

Makei met his Polish counterpart Waszczykowski and Polish President Andrzej Duda. At the final press conference the Belarusian FM publicly acknowledged Belarus' interest in breaking with economic overdependence on Russia: "When it comes to our key partners, we are not going to break away from Russia, we realize that Belarus is overly dependent on it economically. But we want to get rid of this heavy dependence, we want to be less dependent on one state, because this is very disadvantageous during the financial crisis, which we have recently been witness to".²² Makei's participation in the Warsaw meeting of Foreign Ministers of the Visegrad Group and the Eastern Partnership on 12 April 2017 was his third visit to Warsaw since 2014.

On 24 October 2016, Mateusz Morawiecki, Poland's Vice Minister and Minister of Economic Development and Finances, took part in the opening of the twentieth Belarusian–Polish economic forum Good Neighborliness. He also headed the Polish delegation at the fourth meeting of the joint commission on economic cooperation. At the meeting with the Belarusian Prime Minister Andrei Kobiakov, the latter offered Poland the opportunity to purchase energy produced at the Astraviec nuclear power plant, which is to begin functioning in 2018.

Over the past two years, four Poland–Belarus inter-parliamentary meetings took place. This is a new trend in the bilateral relationship, as previously Poland largely ignored official contacts with an undemocratic Belarusian parliament. In 2016 two Polish delegations, one chaired by the Marshal of the Senate of Poland Stanislaw Karczewski and the other by the Deputy Marshal of the Sejm, Ryszard Terlecki, visited Minsk. In January 2017 a Belarusian parliamentary delegation visited Warsaw. On 12–13 April 2017 a Polish parliamentary delegation paid an official visit to Minsk.

It is not clear why Poland puts on emphasis on parliamentary contacts, bearing in mind that a parliament has very limited say in decision-making and generally plays an absolutely marginal role in Belarus' political system. It may be seen as a Poland's attempt to please the Belarus executive which persistently strives for parliament's legitimization in the international arena. Poland is also exploring new forms of cooperation thanks to parliamentary connections. For instance, the Forum of Regions as a new platform of cooperation between Belarus and Poland is in the planning stages of being established, and would gather regional, local and self-government representatives from the two countries. This Forum, according to the Polish Ambassador to Belarus, is to be supervised by the upper

²² Mikhas Ilyin, "Makei says geopolitical foes, Foreign Ministry corrects him saying geopolitical actors" (in Russian), Euroradio, 11 October 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/makey-govorit-geopoliticheskaya-vragi-mid-popravlyaet-geopoliticheskie-igroki>.

chambers of the parliaments.²³ Furthermore, this way Polish parliamentarians would sometimes get an opportunity to meet with Lukashenka, as was the case during the visit of Stanislaw Karczewski in December 2016.

As long as Poland takes a more pragmatic attitude in its relations with Belarus, future Polish financial support for independent Belarusian media and NGOs is unclear. A worrying sign were the plans by the Polish government to revise its support to *Belsat* TV which was provided during the last 10 years. In December 2016 the Polish government announced its plans to cut funding for *Belsat* TV and possibly terminate broadcasting in the Belarusian language. “The earlier contract between MFA and TVP [Polish TV — note] on the creation of *Belsat* TV has already been terminated,” informed Marek Ziółkowski, Deputy Secretary in the Polish MFA, in January 2017.²⁴

As Polish FM Waszczykowski explained, along with the reformatting of *Belsat* the Polish government expects Belarus to agree upon the retransmission of the TVP *Polonia*, a Polish-language channel tailored to Polish diaspora, over Belarusian TV cable networks. However, the head of the Poland-supported Union of Poles in Belarus Anzhalika Borys criticized this idea saying that shutting down *Belsat* would undermine Belarusians’ trust in Poland.²⁵ According to Polish MP Robert Tyszkiewicz, also the long-time Chairman of the Sejm Commission on affairs in Belarus, risking station’s future is a sign of crisis in Poland’s eastern policy.²⁶ A number of other Polish politicians and journalists, as well as Belarusian civil society actors, voiced their criticism of the Polish MFA’s proposal to cut support to *Belsat*.

Although the Polish Prime Minister Beata Szydło reportedly reassured the network’s director Agnieszka Romaszewska of its continuing support to *Belsat*²⁷,

²³ Belarusian Telegraph Agency, “Konrad Pawlik: Forum of Regions will become a new platform of Belarus-Poland cooperation”, 12 December 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://eng.belta.by/society/view/konrad-pawlik-forum-of-regions-will-become-a-new-platform-of-belarus-poland-cooperation-97115-2016/>.

²⁴ Marek Ziółkowski, “The MFA looks to the East. Tough normalization of relations with Belarus” (in Polish), RP newspaper web-page, 31 January 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.rp.pl/Rzecz-o-polityce/301319909-MSZ-patrzy-na-Wschod-Zmudna-normalizacja-relacji-z-Bialorusia.html#ap-1>.

²⁵ Radio Racyja, “Anzhalika Borys says Belarusians need *Belsat*” (in Belarusian), December 2016, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://www.racyja.com/palatyka/anzhalika-borys-belsat-patrebny-gram/>.

²⁶ *Wiadomosci* newspaper web-page, “The Foreign Ministry’s confuses diplomacy with journalism. Debate on Waszczykowski’s expose” (in Polish), 9 February 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/wiadomosci/14,114884,21350369.html>.

²⁷ *Wprost* web-page, “Waszczykowski wanted to cut off funding, Prime Minister intervened. Is *Belsat* TV rescued?” (in Polish), 5 January 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://www.wprost.pl/swiat/10037597/Waszczykowski-chcial-obciac-dotacje-premier-interweniowala-TV-Bielsat-ocalona.html>.

the channel's future remains unclear. Ironically, the worrying news about appeared just before a series of mass social protests across Belarus in February–March 2017. Those were extensively covered by *Belsat* journalists, including through popular live streams, thereby proving the importance of the TV channel for a wider audience. Belarusian authorities reacted with frequent detentions of the network's journalists and raids on its offices, apparently seeking to interrupt live coverage of protests. Needless to say, in the event of shutting it down, Poland would offer invaluable help to Belarusian authorities in their quest for even larger control over flows of information.

Of note, despite intensified contact between the countries in the last three years, the issue of the Union of Poles remains unresolved. Furthermore, in March 2017 Lukashenka publicly stated that Poland maintained training camps for militants preparing for violent riots in Belarus. This statement was later echoed in official media. At the same time some issues of importance to Belarus have not found Poland's favour. For example, in March 2017 the Polish side firmly denied its plans to purchase energy produced at the Belarusian nuclear power plant, citing de-synchronization of power transmission lines and concerns about security standards.²⁸

Conclusion

In 2014 Poland–Belarus relations received a new impetus after three years of having a cold relationship. Since then there has been an unprecedented rise in political contacts between the two countries. Polish foreign minister Witold Waszczykowski paid an official visit to Belarus in 2016 and talked with Alyksandr Lukashenka. His Belarusian counterpart Uladzimir Makei has visited Warsaw three times since 2014. As well as these visits, four Poland–Belarus inter-parliamentary meetings took place in 2016–2017. While Warsaw's objective is to prevent Belarus finding itself in insuperable political and economic dependence on Russia, Minsk is hoping to convert improved political relations with the West as an inflow of investments and creation of joint ventures.

Interestingly, recent improvements in Poland–Belarus relations have taken place during the ruling of Law and Justice in Poland. The last time the party controlled the Polish Government in 2005–2007 the latter pursued a consistent policy of democratic support in Belarus and, among other things, initiated the satellite *Belsat* TV for the Belarusian population. However this time, instead of expanding support to democratic Belarusian projects, the Polish Government

²⁸ *Tut.by* news portal, "Poland refuses to purchase electricity produced by the Belarusian nuclear plant" (in Russian), 18 March 2017, accessed April 25, 2017, <https://news.tut.by/economics/535820.html>.

has put them into question. Discussions about a cut in financial support to *Belsat* and even a possible termination of the channel's broadcasting, is the most illustrative example in this regard.

Witold Waszczykowski, the twelfth Polish foreign minister since Lukashenka's rise to power in 1994, must be aware of the limited successes and painful failures of his many predecessors in their policies towards Belarus. Neither mode of cooperation has motivated Belarusian authorities to implement real democratic changes. There is no reason to expect that lowering support to independent media or Belarusian NGOs would work either. However, it seems that this time Warsaw's willingness to reengage with Belarus is based on geopolitical reasoning to a much greater extent than ever before. Although the EU and Poland remain engaged with Belarusian opposition and the public at large, their approach towards Belarus has lately become more pragmatic.

Despite intensified contact between the two countries in the last three years, the issue of the Union of Poles remains unresolved. The same is true about the local border traffic agreement between Poland and Belarus, which remains blocked by Minsk. Despite this, mobility between the two countries has increased lately thanks to the growing numbers of short-term visas given by Polish consulates, as well as Belarus' recent initiatives on a visa-free entry for foreigners. As a result of changes in Polish national legislation and a growing economic disparity between Poland and Belarus in the former's favour, Poland has become a more popular destination for both temporary labour migrants and permanent immigrants from Belarus. This trend is likely to continue in the future, bearing in mind the introduction of new benefits to holders of the Polish Cards and a continuing economic stagnation in Russia, which has been the most popular destination country for Belarusian labour migrants so far.