

Deterioration of Polish-Belarusian Relations after the 2020 Political Crisis in Belarus

Taras Polovyi

Ph.D. in Political Science, Lviv Polytechnic National University (Lviv, Ukraine)

E-mail: taras.y.polovyi@lpnu.ua

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7908-6606>

Polovyi, Taras (2021) Deterioration of Polish-Belarusian Relations after the 2020 Political Crisis in Belarus. *Ukrainian Policymaker*, Volume 9, 93-100. <https://doi.org/10.29202/up/9/9>

One of the consequences of the internal political crisis of 2020 in Belarus was the deterioration of relations with neighboring countries. Polish-Belarusian relations are indicative in this context. The article notes that Polish-Belarusian relations are again in crisis after five years of normalization of relations. The author emphasizes that the deterioration of interstate relations had almost no effect on relations between Polish and Belarusian societies. The negative consequences of the deterioration of relations for each of the parties are pointed out. The crisis contributes to the destabilization of the domestic political situation in Poland and strengthens the foreign policy isolation of Belarus from the West, which significantly increases its dependence on Russia. The author concludes that Polish-Belarusian relations are not subordinated to the parties' interests and are determined by multilateral relations in the region and the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the EU.

Keywords: Poland, Belarus, NGO, Polish-Belarusian relations, crisis, contradictions.

Received: 23 September 2021 / Accepted: 1 November 2021 / Published: 1 December 2021

Introduction

Throughout the period of existence of Poland and Belarus as independent states, their relations were special. Given the long history of good neighborly relations between Poles and Belarusians, the absence of significant conflicts, and significant contradictions between the Polish and Belarusian peoples, one could hope for a constructive nature of interstate relations at the present stage. However, despite the favorable background, traditionally, Polish-Belarusian bilateral relations are not marked by long-term stability. During the thirty-year history of bilateral cooperation, the periods of cooling and the practical absence of political dialogue at the highest and highest levels alternated with short-term thaw periods and attempts to normalize relations. Polish-Belarusian relations are characterized by bias and the absence of a general line

and strategy of bilateral cooperation. Polish researcher Rafal Chahor, characterizing bilateral Polish-Belarusian relations, points to their low dynamics and practical lack of noticeable success compared to other eastern neighbors of Poland (Czachor, 2011: 133).

In recent years, against the background of Russian aggression in Ukraine and Russia's initiatives to integrate with Belarus within the Union State, Poland has begun to turn from an inconvenient neighbor into a partner for Belarus. Despite the intensification of the interstate dialogue during 2015-2020, which was a record-breaking period of warming between Poland and Belarus, there was no significant breakthrough in relations between the parties. However, as predicted (Polovyi, 2018: 242-243), the preservation of the status quo could not last long, and with the change in the domestic political situation in Belarus after the political crisis of 2020, Polish-Belarusian relations, once again in recent decades, have deteriorated significantly. The Polish side did not recognize the results of the presidential election in Belarus and, accordingly, Alexander Lukashenko as the legitimately elected president. Thus, the contradictions that have existed for a long time between the two states began to come to the fore. In general, Polish-Belarusian relations, from the point of view of both leading politicians of both countries and scientists and researchers, testify to their inconsistency with the national interests of the two states. In this regard, we consider it appropriate to mention the words of Polish historian Eugeniusz Mironowicz, who assesses relations between Poland and Belarus after the two countries gained independence as a period of lost opportunities, mainly due to political leadership (Mironowicz, 2009: 18). So, we can interpret this period as a time of lost opportunities.

Main Text

Simultaneously with the aggravation of relations, there was a setback, which leveled the previous achievements achieved during the period of normalization. Imposing sanctions against Belarus and providing asylum and support to political refugees, Poland has once again taken the lead in democratizing the Belarusian regime and promoting the anti-Lukashenko opposition. The solidarity and support of the citizens of Belarus were discussed in the decision of the Polish Sejm on the situation in Belarus after the 2020 presidential election. Moreover, the parliament asked the Polish government to start providing humanitarian assistance to victims of persecution and to create an opportunity for the rapid reception of Belarusian refugees. The Sejm also called on the European Parliament, the European Council, and the European Commission to take decisive measures to support Belarusian civil society (Solidarity and support for Belarusians, 2020).

In the spirit of such a policy, on 14 November 2020, the parliamentary group on the case of Belarus adopted a position on the assassination of Belarusian activist Raman Bandarenka, which noted the growing wave of persecution in Belarus. Although sanctioning the Lukashenko regime has been controversial and criticized, including Belarusian opposition leader Zenon Paznyak (Sanctions are mistake, 2021), Polish politicians have called on the Polish government and EU governments to step up sanctions against the Belarusian regime. According to Polish politicians, this will be able to stop further bloodshed in this country (Murders and persecution in Belarus, 2020). Thus, in Polish-Belarusian relations, the tendencies characteristic of previous years continued to be observed, when democratic freedoms and values pushed realpolitik into the background. Since then, the Polish authorities have initiated active activities to support the Belarusian opposition, independent media, and Belarusian citizens who have been subjected to

political persecution. This position of the Polish authorities has given grounds to the Belarusian leadership to traditionally accuse it of inspiring mass protests, destabilizing the situation, and interfering in the internal affairs of Belarus.

It is worth noting that nothing fundamentally new has happened in Polish-Belarusian relations in connection with these events. In fact, both sides returned to the format of “critical dialogue” pursued by the Polish government, limiting contacts with the Belarusian authorities while supporting civil society and the opposition. In parallel with the deterioration of the interstate dialogue, the number of Polish diplomats in Belarus was declining. In October 2020, at the request of the Belarusian side, the diplomats of Poland and Lithuania were asked to bring the composition of their missions in Belarus to parity with the Belarusian foreign missions in these countries by 09 October. The Polish side perceived this action as “an unfriendly gesture to which Poland will respond, in due course, properly” (Poland and Lithuania recalled dozens of diplomats from Minsk, 2020).

Even though the relations of the two states repeated the tendencies of the previous years, the crisis in the relations between the two states was not conflicting. However, the escalation that began in 2021 explains the biggest crisis in relations during the existence of Poland and Belarus as independent states. Another scandal preceded the deterioration of relations with the expulsion of diplomats. Belarus expelled Jerzy Tymofeiuik, Consul General of the Polish Consulate in Brest, on 28 February due to its presence at an informal event dedicated to the “Day of the Damned Soldiers”, attended by representatives of Polish-related NGOs and youth organizations in Brest (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). In this action, the Belarusian authorities saw “absolutely unacceptable heroization of war criminals, cynical justification of the genocide of the Belarusian people, very gross violations of the Polish side’s obligations to prevent the heroization of Nazism” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). In response, Poland expelled a diplomat from the Belarusian embassy (The reaction, 2021), whose authorities called such actions “Poland’s excessive, asymmetric and destructive response to Belarus’s lawful and reasoned decision,” and expelled the head and consul of the Polish Consulate General in Grodno (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). On the other hand, Poland declared the consul general of Belarus in Bialystok and the Belarusian consul in Warsaw non grata (Two Belarusian consuls, 2021).

A new round of crisis was caused by the actions of the Belarusian authorities, who initiated the arrest of several members of the unregistered and unrecognized Union of Poles in Belarus, who were accused of inciting national and religious hatred and rehabilitating Nazism (Belta, 2021). Such actions of the Belarusian side, accompanied by the initiation of criminal cases against members of the organization, were seen as a continuation of the political persecution that continued in the country after the beginning of the political crisis in August 2020. This problem spread beyond Belarus and became an international scandal, indicating a fundamentally different scale of the conflict between Poland and Belarus. The statement of the Belarusian human rights activists from the human rights center “Viasna” about the recognition of the detained representatives of the Union of Poles in Belarus as political prisoners also testifies to the political motivation of the detention of the Polish national minority in Belarus (Viasna, 2021). For its part, the Polish Sejm, in its resolution, spoke out “against the brutal campaign of repression launched by the Belarusian authorities against Belarusian citizens of Polish nationality” (Resolution, 2021). The problem of the functioning of the Union of Poles in Belarus is another destructive element that has been arising in Polish-Belarusian relations for a long time. In this context, it is essential to note that the problem with this

topic is the existence of two Unions of Poles in Belarus, one recognized by Minsk and the other recognized by Warsaw. The Belarusian authorities have once again launched an active campaign to discredit and persecute members of the pro-Polish Union of Poles in Belarus. As a result, the organization's leaders and members, namely Anzhelika Borys and Andrei Poczobut, were detained, arrested, and treated as political prisoners (Viasna, 2021).

In parallel with these processes, anti-Polish propaganda intensified in the Belarusian media, which represented Poland as an aggressor state, which, being a puppet of the West, poses a threat to Belarus and has claims on its territory (Sputnik.by, 2020). The topic of destructive activities on the part of the Polish authorities was also actively promoted by the pro-Russian propaganda media in Belarus. Poland is positioned as a state that, guided by imperial ambitions and the desire to build a new Commonwealth, destabilizes the situation in the region and Belarus, which is a demonstration of intentions to become a regional empire and a competitor of Russia for spheres of influence in the region (Sergeev, 2019; Uralov, 2020). Naturally, active propaganda activities have been the subject of analysis by Polish special services, which interpret such actions as an organized and systematic campaign by Belarus and Russia in the framework of the information confrontation against the West (Poland as the enemy, 2020). These claims were supplemented by accusations of the Belarusian leadership against Poland of organizing mass protests in Belarus (Belta, 2020).

However, despite an active anti-Polish propaganda campaign in the media, Belarusian society is not inclined to perceive Poland as an enemy state. The effectiveness of Belarusian propaganda and the results of a poll conducted in April 2021 by the Royal Institute of International Relations Chatham house are being questioned. According to which, in their sympathies for Poland, the Belarusians expressed as follows:

- a) 18% are well;
- b) generally good 49%;
- c) it is difficult to answer 16%;
- d) mostly bad 13%;
- e) very bad 5%.

However, 35% of respondents agreed with the thesis that Poland interferes in the internal affairs of Belarus (Chatham House, 2021).

As for the Polish side, there is a domestic political consensus on the so-called "Belarusian issue." Regardless of party affiliation, both political elites and Polish society overwhelmingly support the government's actions toward Belarus and show solidarity with the anti-Lukashenko opposition and Belarusian civil society. There are centers of activity of the Belarusian opposition in Warsaw, for example, the organization "People's Anti-Crisis Administration" created by the former presidential candidate of Belarus Pavel Latushko. As part of assistance to Belarusian students and scholars, the third edition of the Konstantin Kalinowski Scholarship Program of the Government of Poland entitled "Solidarity with Belarus" was launched.

The Center for Eastern European Studies at the University of Warsaw launched the Białoruś 2020 portal to inform about the Belarusian economy, politics, and society, noting the importance of Belarus for Poland and the region (Białorus, 2020). It regularly posts news and materials on this topic. In addition, Poland promotes popular media activities in Belarus, such as the telegram channel Nexta and the TV channel Belsat.

Despite this, alternative approaches to Polish-Belarusian relations are voiced in the information space of Poland. For example, the article "Kto sieje wiatr..." (Eng. "Who sows

the wind...”) published by *Myśl Polska* is illustrative in this respect. In the material, the responsibility for the deterioration of relations with Belarus lies with the Polish authorities, which are sharply criticized for interfering in the internal affairs of the neighboring state. The claim of official propaganda about the danger from Belarus and Russia is also questioned. The text ends with a rhetorical question about the expediency of abandoning Eastern policy, based on the concept of Prometheism and the very outdated, but, in fact, the harmful doctrine of Giedroits and Mieroshevsky (Who sows the wind, 2021). Also, the translation of this article was published in Belarusian and Russian media such as Belta and InoSmi (Belta, 2021; InoSmi, 2021). However, it should be noted that this publication is characterized by radical rhetoric and is not one of the most famous Polish publications.

Since August 2020, the main problem in Polish-Belarusian relations has been the migration crisis and further growing tensions between the states. The concentration of illegal migrants at the common border has prompted both sides to blame each other for organizing the border crisis. Speaking at the CSTO summit, Alexander Lukashenko said that Poland, exporting migrants from Afghanistan to the Belarusian-Polish border, had staged a border conflict (RiaNovosti, 2021). At the same time, the Polish authorities interpreted such actions as an instrument of political pressure on Poland and aggression by the state behind Russia (Polish radio, 2021). Russian and Belarusian propaganda portrayed the migration crisis as an internal problem of the European Union. Considering this phenomenon as a tool in Russia’s hybrid war against the West, ISANS analyst Maria Avdeeva notes that Russia previously used such tools against the Scandinavian countries in 2015 (Avdeeva, 2021). Polish Defense Minister Mariusz Blaszczak also spoke quite unequivocally and categorically about this, calling the crisis a “dirty game between Lukashenko and the Kremlin” (Blaszczak, 2021). In this way, by inspiring the crisis in Belarus’s relations with Poland and the European Union, Russia is simultaneously strengthening its military presence in Belarus and increasing its political, economic, and influence on the country’s political processes. It also has a significant impact on the security situation in the Eastern European region. That is why, in our opinion, the current crisis should be considered in two dimensions. Locally – as a significant deterioration of Polish-Belarusian relations, and globally – as a general crisis in relations between Belarus and the West and, above all, between Russia and the West.

The crisis has created difficulties for Poland in relations with Belarus and provoked discussions within the country, which provoked protests. In contrast to the situation with Belarusian political emigrants, the Polish government refused to accept refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, and other countries on its territory. The problem of migrants was also raised in the framework of Poland’s dialogue with the institutions of the European Union, as well as at the UN level, which called for the reception of refugees from the Belarusian border (Deutsche Welle, 2021). The human rights organization Amnesty International called on Poland to take similar actions (Amnesty International, 2021). Instead, in response to the migration crisis and joint Russian-Belarusian military exercises West 2021 near the border with Poland, the government imposed a state of emergency in some areas bordering Belarus and initiated the renewal of protective infrastructure on the border with Belarus. Accordingly, the Polish Parliament adopted a special law of 29 December 2021 to protect the border with Belarus, which provided fortifications for construction (Building protection, 2021).

Conclusions

Thus, after 2020, the risk was raised under the next stage of Polish-Belarusian relations, which the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus Vladimir Makei called in 2016 “a historic moment in the transition to a new phase of bilateral relations, in which there will be no room for mistrust, confrontation, intrigue, outdated stereotypes and any ideological prejudices” (Interfax West, 2016). After five years of warming, Polish-Belarusian relations are once again in a state of crisis. They have been determined by multilateral relations in the region and the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the EU. Considering each other as a threat to their own security, Poland, and Belarus, once again, are effectively deprived of the opportunity to conduct a full and constructive interstate dialogue, which, however, has an insignificant effect on relations between the two peoples.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the escalation of contradictions between the houses of states is destructive for each of the parties. The crisis destabilizes the domestic political situation in Poland and strengthens the foreign policy isolation of Belarus, which, in turn, reinforces its dependence on Russia. While the situation on the Polish-Belarusian border increasingly separates the two neighboring countries and contributes to growing tensions and crises in relations with a possible prospect of further escalation. Given the nature and scale of the current crisis, it can be seen as a problem of bilateral ties and a potential threat to the security of the Eastern European region.

References

- Amnesty International (2021) *Poland/Belarus: Afghan asylum seekers on the border unlawfully pressed back*. Available online: <https://www.amnesty.de/informieren/aktuell/polen-belarus-afghanische-asylsuchende-rechtswidrige-push-backs>
- Avdeeva, Marina (2020) *Migrants as weapons. Lukashenka criminalizes Belarus*. Available online: <https://bialorus2020studium.pl/migranci-jako-bron-lukaszienka-kryminalizuje-bialorus/>
- Belta (2020) *Lukashenka said about the rabid behavior of Poland and the Baltic countries against Belarus*. Available online: <https://www.belta.by/president/view/lukashenko-zajavil-ob-ogoltelom-povedenii-polshi-i-stran-baltii-protiv-belarusi-418270-2020/>
- Belta (2021a) *Polish thought.: it's time for Poland to reap the benefits of its thoughtless policy*. Available online: <https://www.belta.by/world/view/mysl-polska-dlja-polshi-prishlo-vremja-pozhinat-plody-svoej-bezdumnoj-politiki-461657-2021/>
- Belta (2021b) *The Prosecutor General's Office opened a criminal case against the chairman of the Union of Poles unregistered in Belarus*. Available online: <https://www.belta.by/incident/view/genprokuratura-vozbudila-ugolovnoe-delo-v-otnoshenii-predsdatelja-nezaregistrirrovannogo-v-belarusi-434261-2021/>
- Bialorus 2020* (2020) Available online: <https://bialorus2020studium.pl/>
- Błaszczak, Mariusz (2021) *The problem at the border is the dirty game of Lukashenka and the Kremlin*. Available online: <https://www.rp.pl/kraj/art18836951-mariusz-blaszczak-problem-na-granicy-to-brudna-gra-lukaszienki-i-kremla>
- Building protection of the state border (2021) *On the construction of state border security. Act of 29 October, 2021*. Available online: https://sip.lex.pl/akty-prawne/dzu-dziennik-ustaw/budowa-zabezpieczenia-granicy-panstwowej-19160327?_ga=2.184312480.760734359.1636403674-1162074127.1635188310#xd_co_f=N-

- WVhNjNiNGEtODk0OS00N2E0LTk5ZTYtMzJkNDNIOTgzYzVi~
Chatham House (2021) *Belarusians' views on the political crisis*. Available online: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/2021-06/2021-06-14-belarusians-views-political-crisis-russian.pdf>
- Czachor, Rafał (2011) The place of the Republic of Belarus in Polish eastern policy. *Bilans 20-lecia. Wrocławski Przegląd Międzynarodowy*, No. 2, 133–148.
- Deutsche Welle (2021) *UN calls on Warsaw to accept refugees from the Belarusian border*. Available online: <https://www.dw.com/ru/oon-prizyvaet-varshavu-prinjat-bezhencev-s-belorusskoj-granicy/a-58975179>
- InoSmi (2021) *Mysł Polska (Poland): who sows the wind*. Available online: <https://inosmi.ru/politic/20210925/250573185.htm>
- Interfax West (2016) *Makei: Belarus and Poland are going through a transition to a new phase of relations, where there is no mistrust and confrontation*. Available online: <https://www.interfax.by/news/belarus/1214002>
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Belarus (2021) *On summoning the Charge d'Affaires of Poland to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus. 09 March 2021*. Available online: https://mfa.gov.by/press/news_mfa/b681bf04c0105a32.html
- Mironowicz, Eugeniusz (2009) Polish-Belarusian neighborhood 1990-2007 – expectations, fears, myths. In *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie. Państwo i społeczeństwo*, t.1, red. S. Jaczyński, R. Pękasa, Siedlce, 11-18
- Murders and persecution in Belarus. There is a call to tighten the sanctions* (2020) Available online: <https://www.gazetaprawna.pl/wiadomosci/artykuly/1496182,bialorus-lukaszenko-sankcje-wobec-rezimu.html>
- Poland and Lithuania recalled dozens of diplomats from Minsk* (2020) Available online: <https://www.dw.com/ru/polen-und-litauen-haben-dutzende-von-diplomaten-aus-minsk-zur%C3%BCckgerufen/a-55223953>
- Poland as the enemy* (2020) Available online: <https://www.gov.pl/web/sluzby-specjalne/ataki-medialne-na-polske-w-zwiazku-z-wydarzeniami-na-bialorusi>
- Polish radio (2021) *Head of the Polish National Security Bureau: The migration crisis will last longer*. Available online: <https://www.polskieradio.pl/398/7856/Artykul/2827824>
- Poloviy, Taras (2018) Interim results of the Polish-Belarusian rapprochement of 2015-2018. *Białoruskie Zeszyty Historyczne – Belarusian Historical Collection*, No. 50, 242-243.
- Resolution of the Sejm on the persecution of Poles in Belarus* (2021) Available online: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=BBA2AD44A99BEEAC-C12586A80033959F>
- RiaNovosti (2021) *Lukashenka accused Poland of creating border conflict*. Available online: <https://ria.ru/20210823/konflikt-1746839835.html>
- Sanctions are a mistake: three arguments of Zenon Poznyak* (2021) Available online: <https://euroradio.fm/ru/sankcyi-geta-pamyłka-try-argumenty-zyanona-paznyaka>
- Sergeev, Nikolay (2019) *Time for intensive rapprochement has come for Belarus and Russia*. Available online: <https://sputnik.by/20190220/Sergeev-dlya-Belarusi-i-Rossii-prishlo-vremya-intensivnogo-sblizheniya-1040182706.html>
- Solidarity and support for Belarusians. Resolution of the Sejm on the situation in Belarus after the presidential election* (2020) Available online: <https://www.sejm.gov.pl/sejm9.nsf/komunikat.xsp?documentId=03FE68985AE3525CC12585C4003B8FD0>

Sputnik.by (2020) *Lukashenko sees the influence of Poland, Czech Republic, Ukraine and Lithuania in protests in Belarus*. Available online: <https://sputnik.by/20200903/Lukashenko-obvinil-v-protestakh-v-Belarusi-Polshu-Chekhiyu-Ukrainu-i-Litvu-1045610193.html>

The reaction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Belarusian diplomat recognized as persona non grata (2021) Available online: <https://www.rp.pl/kraj/art234871-reakcja-msz-bialoruski-dyplomata-uznany-za-persona-non-grata>

Two Belarusian consuls were expelled from Poland (2021) Available online: <https://www.radio.bialystok.pl/wiadomosci/index/id/197417>

Viasna (2021) *Statement on recognizing the detained representatives of the “Union of Poles in Belarus” as political prisoners*. Available online: <http://spring96.org/be/news/102697>

Uralov, Semen (2020) *Outside players have been playing a game in Belarus for several years*. Available online: <https://sputnik.by/20200827/1045553650.html>

Who sows the wind (2021) Available online: <https://myslpolska.info/2021/09/24/kto-sieje-wiatr/>