



Reset and continuation

The PiS government's policy towards Belarus

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Introduction

Poland's policy towards Belarus changed after the current government came to power in 2015. Immediately, the word "reset" appeared in commentaries. Yet the evolution in relations between Warsaw and Minsk is better described as a move towards pragmatism – or, to echo German terminology, *Realpolitik* – in Poland's approach to Belarus.

Economic affairs have come to the foreground in Polish-Belarusian relations, dominating contacts between the two governments and eclipsing the question of values – rule of law, human rights and democracy – that dominated in previous years.

With questions of democracy in Poland relegated to a secondary position by the governing Law and Justice (PiS) party, Warsaw has become readier to cooperate with the Belarusian regime, including on matters as delicate as historical policy.

Yet the improvement in relations involves muting, rather than resolving, longstanding conflicts. Minsk has welcomed the shift in emphasis from values to pragmatic cooperation. In return, the Belarusian authorities present themselves as more open to cooperation on symbolic matters like historical policy and the Polish minority in Belarus.

Although Polish financial support for Belarusian citizen society is increasing, the Polish state shows no desire to change Belarus. Poland's image as a partner for the Belarusian opposition was further damaged by the turmoil over the Belsat television channel in 2017.

The warming of relations with Belarus is in line with the European Union's strategy. Disappointed by sanctions' ineffectiveness, the EU is seeking a new format of relations with Minsk. Paradoxically, Belarusian civil society also largely supports Polish-Belarusian and EU-Belarusian dialogue, seeing it as the only way to draw Belarus away from Russia's embrace.

The PiS government is balancing on a fine line between a useful, pragmatic dialogue and an ambiguous flirting with the regime, which is completely unnecessary for Poland's *raison d'état*.

Reset: breakthrough or continuation

Pragmatic thinking about Belarus emerged before PiS came to power. It involved gradually moving away from the policy of sanctions introduced after the events of December 2010, when the security services brutally suppressed demonstrations following the Belarusian presidential election, which international observers deemed falsified. After opposition leaders were put in prison, the EU imposed sanctions on the regime, at the request of Poland and other countries. These would remain in place until all the political prisoners had been released. The toughening of sanctions in 2012 triggered a diplomatic crisis, with Minsk demanding that the Polish ambassador and EU representative leave Belarus, and other Western ambassadors leaving their posts in solidarity. Although there had been many crises in relations with Belarus since the 1996 coup, Brussels and Warsaw agreed that Alyaksandr Lukashenka should not be let off the hook too easily this time.

Yet by 2013–2014, Polish politicians had abandoned dreams of Belarus becoming a democracy soon, despite Western support for the opposition. Bilateral relations had to be arranged somehow, amid pressure from business circles and disappointment at the sanctions' ineffectiveness. The first meetings at the deputy ministerial level took place. Belarus was also actively involved in preparing the Eastern Partnership summit of 2013 in Vilnius, Lithuania. This went largely unnoticed, as the world had its eyes on the Maidan protests in Kyiv, Ukraine.

The turning point was Russia's annexation of Crimea and the start of the war in the Donbas. The EU, including the Polish government led by Donald Tusk, decided that it was time to return to dialogue with Belarus. It became clear to everyone that this was not the best time to promote democratisation, as instability in Minsk might have proven very dangerous. Lukashenka also realised what Moscow, his sponsor and ally, is capable of.

When PiS won the elections in 2015, Polish-Belarusian relations were already normalising. The new government differed from the previous one, led by the Civic Platform (PO), in its greater engagement in these relations and calls to strengthen them. In this narrative, the emphasis was shifted from supporting the opposition to economic affairs. The previous government had considered referring to "official" Minsk as a "partner" too politically risky; nobody wanted to pose for photos with a smiling Lukashenka, who had until recently been referred to as the "last dictator in Europe". For PiS, though, high-level meetings accompanied by cordial words and gestures were less problematic.

Successes

By shifting the emphasis in policy towards Belarus, the PiS government achieved some positive results in the economic sphere, along with the politics of memory and the teaching of Polish.

Economic affairs

In 2016–2017, economic relations between Poland and Belarus strengthened significantly. In part, this results from objective macroeconomic factors, as Poland's economy grew while that of Russia, Minsk's main trading partner, contracted. However, the favourable political atmosphere on both sides of the border contributed, too.

Trade between Poland and Belarus rose from USD 2 billion in 2016 to 2.55 billion in 2017, approaching the record 3 billion from before relations broke down in 2010. Polish investment in Belarus rose by 39% year-on-year in 2017 (including direct investment, which grew by 33%).¹

Then-deputy Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's visit to Minsk in October 2016 reflected the warming political atmosphere – and was a signal for investors. Although business meetings at various levels had been taking place for the past few years, this was the first time since the start of the “reset” that such a senior Polish politician, responsible for Warsaw's economic policy, had visited the Belarusian capital.

The countries' central banks have been working closely, as noted by Polish and Belarusian experts. Their joint actions are the first Twinning project carried out in Belarus under the EU's auspices.² This is an important area of cooperation, both in the context of threats stemming from Russian capital's dominant role at Belarusian banks and the valuable lessons of Poland's stable banking sector for Minsk. In the long run, this cooperation could strengthen the Belarusian financial system's independence from Russia.

Since PiS came to power, Belarus increasingly appears in analyses on potential infrastructure projects, including as part of Eastern Partnership connectivity initiatives and Belt and Road plans developing transport infrastructure between China and Europe.³ The possibility of linking Brest, on the Polish-Belarusian border, with the Central Transport Hub planned by the Polish government by broad-gauge railway, which would foster the development of passenger and cargo traffic, is being analysed. Belarus is also tipped as a possible future customer of the new sea port being built in Gdańsk.

Historical memory

Since relations have warmed, Belarus has become more open to Poland's symbolic needs. Warsaw has obtained permission to renovate memorial sites and rebury soldiers of the Border Protection Corps, who died in what is now Belarus. The Belarusian side even agreed to a major ceremony featuring representative units of the Polish Army, which should be considered a gesture of goodwill towards Poland.⁴ Visiting Minsk on 28–30 January 2018, head of the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN) Jarosław Szarek said that he is greatly impressed by Belarus's caring attitude to remembrance, proof of improving cooperation in this area.⁵ An event on 29 June 2018 remembering the victims of the Maly Trostenets Nazi extermination camp, on the outskirts of Minsk, was attended

1 Based on information from Poland's Ministry for Entrepreneurship and Technology.

2 https://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/belarus/37853/eu-supports-belarus-central-bank-1st-twinning-project-country_en.

3 M. Beim, *Tak blisko, a tak daleko. Wyzwania dla współpracy transportowej UE z państwami Partnerstwa Wschodniego*, Raport 6/2017, Centrum Analiz Klubu Jagiellońskiego, p. 21, 47–48 and others., <http://cakj.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Tak-blisko-a-tak-daleko-6.2017.pdf>.

4 http://www.minsk.msz.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/upamietniamy_zolnierzy_kop_w_klecku.

5 <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/46311,Wizyta-delegacji-Institutu-Pamieci-Narodowej-w-Minsku-Bia-lorus-2830-stycznia-201.html>.

by Krzysztof Szczerski, head of the Polish president's cabinet. He also laid flowers in Kuropaty, the site of mass executions by the NKVD. Szczerski expressed his appreciation for the progress in Polish-Belarusian dialogue and did not rule out a visit to Belarus by President Andrzej Duda in the not-too-distant future.⁶

Teaching Polish

There has also been real, albeit incremental, progress in the teaching of Polish in Belarus, both to children from the Polish minority and to Belarusian ones. There has not been a systemic breakthrough in the status and rights of the Polish minority. Yet, outside the official education system, opportunities to teach Polish language and culture by organisations that the Belarusian authorities considers non-political have increased. In January 2018, the Polish Educational Society (Polska Macierz Szkolna), the main Polish organisation in Belarus apart from the Union of Poles in Belarus, which is not recognised by the authorities, managed to open a Polish language school in Minsk. With support from Polish diplomats, it opened in the building of the Belarusian Union of Veterans, which reflects the Belarusian authorities' tolerance for the Society's activities. Meanwhile, a middle school in Minsk created another class for Belarusian children with Polish as a foreign language for the 2017/2018 school year in response to high demand.

Mistakes

Unnecessary sympathy

Despite progress in some areas of Polish-Belarusian relations, the PiS government has made mistakes. The most serious, undermining the foundations of Poland's policy so far, is excessive cordialness towards the Belarusian authorities and Lukashenka himself. Belarus' pragmatic elite does not expect gestures of this kind. Meanwhile, they place Poland in an ambiguous, awkward position, threatening to damage its diplomatic image not just among Western partners, but in Minsk itself.

An example of this excessive familiarity was recognising the Belarusian parliament, which serves as a mere *façade*. Establishing close relations between the two countries' parliaments, with two visits to Minsk by Sejm deputy speaker Ryszard Terlecki and Senate speaker Stanisław Karczewski, was completely unnecessary. Warsaw compromised its image, without obtaining any visible political or economic benefits in return.

Avoiding talk of values, the death penalty or freedom of speech fits Poland's new "pragmatic" approach to Minsk, but it has damaged Poland's image in Belarusian civil society. Despite the considerable sums that the Polish governments spends on supporting Belarusian society, this *milieu* feels that it has been "abandoned" for the sake of friendly relations with the authorities. The Polish government's attitude contrasts with that of officials from other EU countries and the EU institutions, whose pragmatism does not prevent them from speaking out about human rights in Belarus.⁷

⁶ It is worth noting, though, that Belarusian opposition circles drew attention to the fact that, unlike Austria and Germany, who sent their presidents, Poland was represented by a lower-rank official; <http://www.prezydent.pl/kancelaria/aktywnosc-ministrow/art,1256,minister-krzysztof-szczerski-z-wizyta-na-bialorusi.html>.

⁷ An example is the meeting between the EU's for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, and Belarusian Foreign Minister Uladzimir Makei in Brussels on 31 May 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/45658/federica-mogherini-met-foreign-minister-belarus-vladimir-makei_en.

Polish officials have also made controversial statements on the politics of memory, as if they did not see the falsity (and frequent anti-Polish accents) of Belarus's historical policy. Warsaw is right to strive to cooperate with Minsk on history. Yet statements like IPN head Jarosław Szarek's praise for the work of the Great Patriotic War Museum in Minsk, the key instrument of Belarus's historical policy, should not be made.⁸ The Belarusian regime is not interested in casting light on the NKVD's anti-Polish actions or finding the remains of the victims of the Augustów roundup, a coordinated operation in July 1945 against the Polish underground active in what is now the Polish-Belarusian borderland. It conceals the truth about the Katyń massacre. Yet the PiS government appears not to notice this, while antagonising Ukraine's pro-European government on historical grounds, which undermines the credibility of Poland's historical policy.

Lack of coordination

Poland's recent policy towards Belarus lacks coordination, as exemplified by the scandal concerning the Belsat television channel in 2017. Senior officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who remained on cool terms with the channels management, proposed to cut funding for Belsat (which would have meant the closure of the only independent television channel broadcasting in Belarusian) and replace it with TVP Polonia, the Polish-language television channel for Poles living abroad, which would be officially broadcast in Belarus via cable television. This worried the Belarusian opposition, undermining its trust in Poland. The Polish government's image suffered, too, as the dispute exposed its inability to resolve conflicts within the system and its lack of a coherent policy towards Belarus.⁹ The Belarusian authorities came to see the Polish government as a weak partner that can be "played off" easily.

This lack of coordination is not limited to waging internal battles in public; it also includes institutional disorder. Poland has two parliamentary teams working on Belarus. The first of these, Parliamentary Team for Belarus, has seven members; three each from PiS and PO and one from Nowoczesna. They include MPs with a long-term interest in Poland's eastern neighbours, such as Robert Tyszkiewicz (its chairman), Michał Dworczyk and Małgorzata Gosiewska.¹⁰ The second is the Parliamentary Team for Polish-Belarusian cooperation established in March 2016, chaired by Adam Andruszkiewicz (Wolni i Solidarni), which has five members; two MPs from the Wolni i Solidarni parliamentary circle and three from Kukiz'15.¹¹ This second team pursues its own, more broadly unknown, policy towards Belarus, focused on building contacts with the Belarusian parliament and developing economic cooperation. Its actions are not coordinated with the MFA or other institutions working on Belarus. The team's activity is ignored by PiS, too.

Unresolved issues

The status of the Polish minority

The Polish minority is the largest in Belarus, after the well-assimilated Russian minority. According to the 2009 census, there are 294,500 Poles in Belarus, which has a population of 9.5 million, including

8 "The IPN chairman proposed cooperation to the Museum's management. The cooperation could encompass exchanging archival documents or organising conference" – the IPN states on its website: <https://ipn.gov.pl/pl/aktualnosci/46311,Wizyta-delegacji-Instytutu-Pamieci-Narodowej-w-Minsku-Bialorus-2830-stycznia-201.html>.

9 The MFA failed to cut funding for Belsat because the channel obtained the support of influential politicians in the governing camp.

10 <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/agent.xsp?symbol=SKLADZESP&Zesp=368>.

11 Ibid.

785,000 Russians.¹² Ten thousand of the Poles are members of the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), which has been unrecognised by the authorities since 2005. A pro-regime Union of Poles in Belarus was established in its place, taking over most of the delegatised Union's assets, including Polish Houses, cultural and community centres for the Polish minority, renovated using money from the Polish government. The delegatised ZPB was the biggest NGO in Belarus. Minsk accuses it of being overly politicised and of anti-government activity; its activists are periodically persecuted. The authorities categorically refuse to legalise it again. While there has been no breakthrough, Minsk has started tolerating its activity more as Polish-Belarusian relations have warmed. For example, in 2017 the delegatised ZPB opened headquarters in Minsk in rooms rented from the presidential administration. At the same time, organisations considered non-political by the authorities, such as the Polish Educational Association (PMS), operate without major obstacles.

Warsaw faces a dilemma: should it continue fighting for the ZPB's recognition, or focus on broadening the teaching of Polish and promotion of culture by other organisations, such as the PMS? Both governments are mulling the possibility of making PMS responsible for the Polish Houses. This would mean a radical change in Poland's policy towards the ZPB over the past 15 years – a risky move. Firstly, it could be interpreted as Warsaw withdrawing its support for the ZPB. Secondly, it could intensify the acute personal conflicts between representatives of the Polish minority. Thirdly, success is not guaranteed. If relations with Poland worsen, the Belarusian authorities could take over the Polish Houses again and curtail the PMS's activity using administrative measures.

In the first half of 2018, the prevailing view in Poland was that Warsaw should support the ZPB led by Andżelika Borys while refusing to make concessions on the Polish minority. This view is held by Michał Dworczyk, who was appointed head of the Prime Minister's Chancellery in the reshuffle last winter and remains in contact with Borys. As a result, the ZPB and Borys' influence on Warsaw's policy towards the Polish minority in Belarus has increased significantly.

Looking ahead

The turn towards *Realpolitik* in Poland's policy towards Minsk is a response to current needs, in line with the EU's policy towards Belarus following Russian aggression in Ukraine.

Recently, though, the Polish authorities have been saying less about Belarus. The country should not be forgotten, even if the effects of "warming" relations seem disappointing. Poland's experience and geopolitical location entails more of a commitment to policy towards Belarus than the EU average. Fortunately, overly warm gestures towards the authorities in Minsk have become less frequent. Nevertheless, normalisation of relations with Belarus should remain on the PiS government's list of priorities.

Better coordination is needed to continue engaging on several fronts. Poland must talk to the authorities and develop business relations, but also support the opposition, human rights and the development of independent Belarusian culture and language. Otherwise, Warsaw will expose itself to accusations of unnecessary "chumminess" with the regime, along with a loss of credibility – and effectiveness.

12 This is over 100,000 fewer Poles than in 1999. See *Spis powszechny Republiki Białoruś 2009*, Narodowy Komitet Statystyczny Republiki Białoruś, http://www.belstat.gov.by/upload-belstat/upload-belstat-pdf/perepis_2009/5.8-0.pdf, <https://archive.is/20120708042051/belstat.gov.by/homep/ru/perepic/p6.php#selection-147.1-147.19>.

On historical policy, Warsaw needs to tread more carefully. Recent cooperation has brought tangible results, with Polish memorial sites in Belarus looked after. Yet the IPN needs to watch its narrative, and should not be praising the Great Patriotic War Museum and its management on its website. It is unclear why the current Polish government is placing relations with Ukraine on a knife-edge because of historical conflicts over the Volhynia Massacre of 1943–1944, while expressing sympathy for Belarus's historical policy, which repeats Soviet lying patterns. The impression is that Warsaw does not seek a shared understanding of the past with Belarus, but simply to approach historical policy in a similar way, selecting comfortable historical facts and interpreting them arbitrarily to construct the desired historical narrative.

The Polish minority is a delicate matter, too. Warsaw needs to rule out the possibility of recognising the pro-regime Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), as that would undermine Poland's policy so far. Even if Minsk pledged to "tolerate" the unrecognised ZPB led by Andżelika Borys, the Belarusian authorities might "blackmail" Warsaw by threatening to wipe it out completely. Instead, Warsaw should negotiate the transfer of the Polish Houses, currently crumbling under the pro-regime ZPB's management, to the Polish Educational Association, so that they can serve their earlier purpose – teaching Polish. Concerns that the Belarusian authorities could confiscate these properties again if relations with Poland worsen are not unfounded. Yet given the nature of the Belarusian system, that could happen to any building used by the Polish minority, regardless of who owns it formally.

Engaging with Belarus on several fronts also requires noticing new trends in independent *milieus* while continuing to support civil society and the opposition. Despite the recent controversies, Poland should continue to fund Belsat for both practical (access to independent information, free from Russian and Belarusian propaganda, while spreading the Belarusian language) and image-related reasons. Any battles between the channel's management and the government should not be waged in Polish newspapers or on social media.

Moreover, Belarusian civil society should no longer be equated with the opposition. A range of non-political civic initiatives are developing in Belarus with the authorities' tacit consent. Efforts to strengthen Belarusian national identity and build a modern society – developing the Belarusian language, protecting the rights of minority groups (including LGBTQ+), and promoting culture and art – deserve support.

One way for Poland to support Belarusian society without resistance from Minsk would be to return to EU talks on unilaterally waiving the visa regime for Belarusian citizens or issuing free multiple-entry visas to all eligible applicants. Belarusians are eager to travel abroad, with the EU one of the most popular destinations, as the number of Schengen visas issued illustrates.¹³ Making it easier for Belarusians to travel west is in Poland's economic and political interest. Warsaw's current engagement in EU-Belarus talks on liberalising the visa regime, which came to a standstill three years ago, is insufficient.

13 In 2016, 693,395 type-C visas were issued to Belarusian citizens. Of these, 556,644 were multiple-entry visas (80.3%). One in two were issued by Poland: 312,148, including 262,606 multiple-entry visas (81.1%). According to Poland's MFA, 1269 visas of the maximum, five-year length were issued to Belarusians between January and November 2016. Sources: *Visa statistics for consulates – 2016*, European Commission, https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/what-we-do/policies/borders-and-visas/visa-policy/docs/2016_consulates_schengen_visa_stats_en.xlsx, and *Odpowiedź na interpelację nr 8450 w sprawie wiz pięcioletnich dla obywateli Ukrainy i Białorusi*, Sejm Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, <http://www.sejm.gov.pl/Sejm8.nsf/InterpelacjaTresc.xsp?key=41423D4C>.

For Belarusian civil society, it is also important that Western countries continue to promote democratic values, demanding the abolition of the death penalty and calling for freedom of assembly and fair elections. Despite warming relations with Minsk, EU officials have not forgotten about these issues. Only Poland's voice has been inaudible in recent years. The normalisation of relations with Belarus should not mean that basic values are forgotten.

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ISBN: 978-83-65882-44-8
Warsaw 2018