

Belarus and Poland: is the difficult period finally over?

Belarus and Poland are moving closer towards a rapprochement, with Belarusian foreign minister Vladimir Makei paying a working visit to Warsaw on 10 October.

His Polish counterpart, Witold Waszczykowski, seems to have a personal affinity for Makei; Waszczykowski trusts that President Alexander Lukashenka's intentions to mend bilateral ties between Minsk and Warsaw are sincere.

Publicly, both parties have expressed enthusiasm about the recent improvements in Belarusian – Polish relations. However, the increase in dialogue has so far failed to foster any new breakthrough projects. Many obstacles preventing genuine improvement in bilateral relations remain, such as the treatment of the Polish minority in Belarus.

Is the difficult period finally over?

For most of the past two decades, the relationship between Belarus and Poland [has remained strained](#), regardless of whether the ruling party in Warsaw be Socialists, Liberals or Conservatives. The failure of a [short-lived attempt at a thaw](#) in 2010 ended in even deeper animosity between Minsk and Warsaw.



A [phone call](#) by then-Prime Minister Donald Tusk to [Alexander](#)

[Lukashenka](#), placed in the context of Russian aggression in Ukraine, may have served as a turning point in bilateral relations. Around the same time, a working group on trade and investments representing both countries met in Minsk. The group had failed to meet for the five preceding years.

Since then, bilateral dialogue has been developing dynamically and without interruptions. Both Belarus and Poland have regularly hosted visits from ministers, deputy ministers, and high-level officials from different agencies and institutions.

The parties have been actively engaged in discussions on foreign policy and security, trade and investment, infrastructure development and construction, agriculture and forestry, culture and environment, and so on. In July, Belarus and Poland [signed an intergovernmental agreement](#) on cooperation in education.

In March 2016, Witold Waszczykowski [visited Minsk](#) to meet with his Belarusian counterpart [Vladimir Makei](#). President Lukashenka received the Polish official and reassured him that Belarus was prepared for “closest cooperation with Poland”.

In August, Poland made a significant gesture to the Belarusian authorities when Ryszard Terlecki, vice-speaker of the Polish Sejm, came to Minsk to meet with the chairmen of both chambers of the [Belarusian rubber-stamp parliament](#).

The unwarranted recognition of this institution, which plays no role in Belarus’s domestic or foreign policy, can neither promote democracy in Belarus nor have any meaningful impact on bilateral relations by means of inter-parliamentary dialogue. This was merely a favour granted to the Belarusian executive authorities in expectation of later favours in return.

No problems whatsoever in bilateral relations?

During his trip to Warsaw on 10 October, Vladimir Makei held talks with his Polish counterpart. He was also received by Polish president Andrzej Duda.

On the same day, Makei met with Krzysztof Szczerski, a senior official in charge of the president's foreign policy schedule. The two officials likely discussed the conditions and timing of a meeting between Andrzej Duda and Alexander Lukashenka.

Makei made his introductory remarks in Belarusian – still [very rare](#) among top-level Belarusian officials. Warsaw surely noted the fact that Belarus's foreign minister expressed himself in the language of his country's titular nation in a foreign capital. The choice to use the Belarusian tongue sent a delicate signal to Polish authorities that they were indeed hosting a representative of an independent nation rather than a Russian satellite.



However, Belarusian and Polish officials have so far failed to announce any major joint projects, initiatives, or breakthrough solutions to unresolved bilateral issues. Very few specifics were provided. At a press briefing after his meeting with Waszczykowski, Makei spoke warmly about the current tone of Belarusian – Polish relations. He went as far as stating that “Belarus and Poland [were] experiencing a historic moment of transition to a new period of bilateral relations”.

In the same statement, Makei did mention certain “remaining problematic issues” before immediately stressing that “[Belarus and Poland] have no problems whatsoever ... in our

bilateral relations". A possible interpretation of this contradiction may be that any remaining disagreements are not of a bilateral nature but rather imposed or provoked from the outside, by Brussels, Washington or even Moscow.

Can one expect a breakthrough?

Despite the recent rapprochement, Belarus and Poland have accumulated a number of issues during the previous period of strained and often antagonistic relations. These problems need to be resolved for a full normalisation of bilateral ties.

The current conservative Polish government has been particularly attentive to issues pertaining to national identity, history, and traditions.



Waszczykowski personally asked his Belarusian counterpart to help bring to light the full list of victims of the [Katyn massacre](#), presumably stored in the KGB archives in Minsk. While Makei has indeed brought some historic documents to Warsaw, he maintains that the authorities have failed to find the Katyn list in the Belarusian archives.

The status of [Polish Catholic clergy in Belarus](#) also remains a sensitive issue for bilateral relations. In July, the Belarusian agency in charge of religion categorically refused to extend the work permits of three Polish priests serving in Belarusian parishes. The agency reversed its decision a few days later, apparently under pressure from the foreign ministry. However, this situation may reoccur any day.

A source in the foreign ministry has told Belarus Digest about Makei's plan to reunite the Union of Poles in Belarus, which

[the government cleaved in two](#) in 2005. The authorities are allegedly proposing to hold a unification congress of the independent, non-registered association recognised by Poland, and the government-controlled union. The goal is to democratically elect new leaders – but the Belarusian government insists on green-lighting the candidatures in advance.

The intention is to heal the sorest point in the two countries' relations. It is unclear, however, whether activists of the two associations will be ready to work together after years of mutual animosity and mistrust.

In its turn, the Belarusian authorities insist that Poland curtails its support of democratic Belarusian activists. Belarus's foreign ministry is particularly invested in the closure of the [Belsat TV channel](#), which is broadcasted from Poland and funded by the Polish government.

Incidentally, Waszczykowski is said to be reassessing the need for Belsat. The minister seems to be ready to go as far as shutting the project down completely. This decision would be part of a trend of Poland [decreasing its support of Belarusian pro-democracy groups](#).

The Belarusian ambassador to Poland has lately been a frequent guest in Polish government agencies, where he is hard selling [energy from the Astraviec nuclear power plant](#). So far, Poland has been very careful in its response to this pitch, balancing between its loyalty to Lithuania and the potential commercial benefits.

Regional security considerations and genuine economic interests are encouraging Poland to pursue greater engagement with the Belarusian authorities, putting aside “ideological superstitions” (to use a term coined by Makei in Warsaw).

It remains to be seen to what extent this new attitude will allow Warsaw to look past Minsk's reluctance to undertake any

meaningful step towards political liberalisation, which remains the fundamental condition of Europe's full-fledged cooperation with Belarus.