

# 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.

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## **Instead of Landing in Minsk, Kaczyński's Plane Crashed in Smolensk**

 In September 2009, the President of Poland Kaczyński sent his condolences to the President of Belarus because of the death of two Belarusian pilots in a crash of Su-27 fighter plane at an air show. Today, state leaders around the world are condoling with the Poles at the loss of President Lech Kaczyński and 95 others in a plane crash near Smolensk.

On April 10, Lech Kaczyński was flying to commemorate the deaths of thousands of Poles murdered by the Soviet Union and buried in the Katyn Forest just across the eastern border of Belarus. On March 5, 1940, Joseph Stalin signed an order to execute 25,700 Polish prisoners of war in the camps of Ostashkov, Starobelsk, and Kozelsk. Only in 1990 did the Soviet authorities admit responsibility for the Katyn murders.

Because of the fog, it was difficult for the pilots to land in Smolensk airport, near the Katyn Forest. Polish media report that air traffic controllers had advised the Polish pilots not to attempt to land at the airport, but turn around and head for Minsk, the capital of Belarus. The obscure military aerodrome near Smolensk lacked the

necessary navigational equipment to receive planes in heavy fog. Despite these warnings, Polish pilots, apparently under pressure from their VIP passengers, decided to take the risk of landing in Smolensk. Perhaps, the Polish delegation had its own reasons not to land in Belarus.

Few people outside Warsaw and Minsk know that Lech Kaczyński was one of the staunchest defenders of human rights in Belarus and a vocal critic of its president. Just last month, condemning the detentions and trials of activists of the Union of Poles in Belarus, Lech Kaczyński wrote a personal letter to Alyaksandr Lukashenka defending the Polish minority. Having received no response from the Belarusian authorities, Lech Kaczynski appealed to the European Union's institutions through the President of the European Union Herman Van Rompuy and European Parliament President Jerzy Buzek.

Notably, Belarus did not send a delegation to the earlier ceremony in Katyn. This is despite the fact that Katyn's victims included hundreds of Belarusians who served in the Polish Army in 1940 when Western Belarus was a part of Poland.

If the Belarus president were to fly to Smolensk, he would not have used an old Soviet plane for that. Ever mindful of what losing their leader would mean for the Belarusian people, President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has long ago switched to the sleek and safe US Boeing. Lech Kaczyński was flying a 20-year old Tupolev Tu-154. Tupolev's long history of crashes has never been a secret, but the Polish leadership considered buying a new US-manufactured Boeings an unnecessary indulgence during the financial crisis.

Seventy years after the massacre orchestrated by Stalin, the Polish people once again lost some of its best

compatriots in the cold foggy forest near Katyn.

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## **Katyn Killings Commemorated Without a Belarusian Delegation**

 Just as Belarus Digest had predicted, there is no news of a Belarusian delegation attending the ceremony in Katyn, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Soviet killings of officers of the Polish army.

This even despite the fact that one of the central issues preceding the meeting of Russian and Polish prime ministers Vladimir Putin and Donald Tusk has been the so-called Belarusian List. The list contains names of officers of the Polish Army killed by the Soviets in extermination sites in Belarus (including, very likely, the infamous Kurapaty forest). Russian authorities claim they have not found it in archives. According to Radio Free Europe, Ukrainian and Russian lists have already been found and published.

Not to say about the hundreds of people from Belarus who had been killed in Katyn. In 1940 West Belarus was part of the Second Polish Republic. Many people from the region have served in the Polish army or have just been mobilized after the German invasion in 1939.

BBC Russian edition quotes Belarusian intellectual Liavon Barsceuski who draws parallels between Katyn and Kurapaty:

*Here is a person from Minsk. Lieutenant Edmund Menke from Minsk, as the sign says. Overall, there are quite a few people from Belarus here: from Hrodna, from Biaroza (that's in Polesia), from the Wilno voivodeship, most of which is now Belarus. there are also many unidentified victims, who also could be our compatriots. This memorial is also a memorial for us.*

It's not Russia or Poland to blame for Belarusian authorities ignoring the memory of hundreds of Belarusians buried in Katyn. As already mentioned, Belarusian authorities do not care about organizing a decent memorial in Kurapaty near Minsk. What should one expect in relation to Belarusian graves outside the country?

Still, there is at least some good news indirectly related to Katyn. Today the Belarusian Academy of Arts has awarded Andrzej Wajda, author of the well-known film about the Katyn massacre, an honorary doctorate in recognition of his life's work. A symbolic coincidence, if not more.

Read reports by [Daily Mail](#), [BusinessWeek](#), [Der Standart](#) (in German).

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**Today is the 70th Anniversary  
of the Katyn Massacre**

# Decision



On this day 70 years ago, on March 5, 1940, the politburo of the Communist Party of the USSR has passed the decision to kill several thousands officers of the Polish army. The killings are now known as Katyn Massacre, named after the first known place of where the executions have taken place. The Katyn Massacre is a historical episode where the role of Belarus is usually understated or, better said, ignored at all. This has its reasons.

Among the officers of the Polish army killed in Katyn there were many people from West Belarus that was part of the Second Polish Republic before 1939. In particular, one of two generals killed by the Soviets was Bronisław Bohatyrewicz from Hrodna, who had also been a commander of Belarusian national self-defence units in 1918-1919. According to historians' estimates, about a quarter of the 14.5 thousands people killed in Katyn were Belarusians.

A delegation of Belarusian NGO activists and opposition politicians has visited Katyn in August 2009 to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Soviet-Nazi alliance that has preceded the joint invasion to Poland. The current Belarusian officials, however, ignore the Katyn massacre. The state ideology rather sympathizes with the Soviets. September 17, the day of the Soviet invasion to West Belarus, is still officially called the Day of Reunification of Belarus.

Several years ago the city authorities of Minsk have constructed a road through Kurapaty, an execution site similar to Katyn, ignoring all protests. Unfortunately, there is no place for the history of West Belarus in the current state ideology of the Belarusian government. Belarus is viewed as the descendant of only the BSSR and not as well of West

Belarus (and thereby partly of mid-war Poland). All issues around Katyn and the Soviet invasion to Poland in 1939 are therefore viewed as a matter of Polish-Russian relations, ignoring the geographically obvious fact that Belarus, the land between Poland and Russia, has been in the very centre of the events of 1939 and 1940 as well.

There is no sign of Belarusian officials planning to participate in Katyn commemoration ceremony planned for April 2010. It seems like organizers of the event don't even think of inviting high-ranked Belarusian officials. Read a story by [thenews.pl](http://thenews.pl) and [a petition](#) by the Russian human rights organization Memorial to president Dmitry Medvedev to open archives and to officially rehabilitate the victims of Katyn.

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## **Belarusians in Washington Mark 16th with Film Screening Documenting Soviet Atrocities**



On October 16, 2009, a screening of "The Soviet Story" followed by a reception was organized by members of the DC

chapter of the Belarusian-American Association (BAZA) as part of the activities aimed to commemorate the International Day of Solidarity with Belarus.

“Given the current repressive and dictatorial regime in Belarus, we thought it appropriate to commemorate the 16th with a screening of this film that documents past atrocities that Belarus has suffered under the Soviet regime,” said Alesia Kipel, co-chair of the DC chapter of Belarusian-American Association in her address to the audience.

“The Soviet Story” is a 2008 documentary film about Soviet Communism and Soviet-German collaboration before 1941, written and directed by Edvīns Šnore. The film argues that there were close philosophical, political and organizational connections between the Nazi and Soviet systems before and during the early stages of World War II. It highlights the Great Purge as well as the Great Famine, Katyn massacre, Gestapo-NKVD collaboration, Soviet mass deportations and medical experiments in the GULAG.