

Three 'thorns in the flesh' of Belarus-Poland relations

Despite some recent positive trends in relations between Belarus and Poland, several unresolved issues hamper their full normalisation.

Warsaw remains largely bound by the European Union's official policy towards Minsk. The Belarusian authorities are suspicious of Poland's support of democratic forces in Belarus.

Meanwhile, Poland's conservative government has recently shown greater independence from Brussels on many policy issues. They have also visibly reduced their support of the Belarusian opposition, to the latter's great chagrin. This has led to tacit approbation from Lukashenka's government.

However, the primary sources of conflict in the two countries' relations remain of a purely bilateral nature. Will Minsk be willing to overlook its economic and security concerns and open the way to a full mending of ties?

Local border traffic: still locked

A Belarusian government official, who spoke with *Belarus Digest* anonymously, outlined three major stumbling blocks to [Belarus-Poland relations](#): locked local border traffic, the divided Polish minority in Belarus, and the problematic Pole's Card.

Implementation of a [local border traffic](#) agreement between Belarus and Poland would facilitate cross-border exchanges for

1.7m people (1.1m of them Belarusians) who live near the border.

In addition to being able to acquire [expensive short-term visas](#) (currently the only option), these people would become eligible for cheap multi-year travel permits. These documents would allow them to visit relatives and do shopping in the 30-km adjacent border area.

Belarus ratified the local border traffic agreement in December 2010, a few weeks before the violent crackdown on the Belarusian opposition, which led to a deep freeze of Belarus's relations with Europe. The country then suspended the necessary intergovernmental procedures, thus [preventing the agreement from taking effect](#).

Now, although the most difficult period in bilateral relations is over, Belarus remains reluctant to enact the traffic law. The authorities claim that the existing infrastructure capacities would not cope with the expected increase in cross-border traffic (between 30% and 70%).



The border checkpoints are indeed oversaturated. Dmitry Mironchik, the foreign ministry's spokesman, admitted on 29 September that Poland's assistance in [securing EU funds](#) to modernise the infrastructure would help to launch the local border traffic.

Meanwhile, the Belarusian authorities fear that the potential [hordes of Belarusian shoppers](#) would cause a dramatic increase in non-taxed imports from Poland. This could further undermine the country's failing economy and weaken the Belarusian currency. In their turn, the Polish authorities would welcome

greater inflows of shoppers to Poland's less-developed eastern region.

There are also security concerns. Belarus's security apparatus feels uneasy about increased foreign presence in the [border area](#). It could mean less efficient control over this special-status territory, which includes two major cities, Brest and Hrodna.

The Pole's Card: an economic and security threat

The Belarusian government has always [been hostile to the Pole's Card](#), viewing it as a way for the Polish government to meddle in Belarus's domestic affairs.

This document, introduced in 2008, grants many rights and benefits to people with nominally Polish roots in exchange for an oath of allegiance to the Polish nation.

The number of eligible cardholders in Belarus may exceed half a million Belarusians. As of December 2015, 77,818 Belarusian citizens received the card.

Many cardholders never thought about their Polish roots before the Pole's Card became available. Most have been enticed by more pragmatic considerations – primarily including access to a free Polish visa, which also allows for travel in the Schengen zone.



The Polish government has ignored repeated requests from Belarus to suspend the programme, which allegedly violates international law, until an advisory opinion of the Venice Commission can be obtained.

Instead, the legislation on the Pole's Card has recently been amended to simplify the cardholders' access to residence permits and Polish citizenship. It also provides for financial support of their resettlement to Poland.

Poland wants to encourage immigration from Belarus. The country, which is experiencing a labour shortage, would prefer to attract qualified workers from Belarus over migrants from the Middle East. Belarus can hardly rejoice at these prospects.

The Belarusian government also sees such dual-loyalists as a potential threat to state security. It has already prohibited civil servants and elected officials from obtaining the Pole's Card. Moreover, a new provision in Polish law authorises the submission of applications on the territory of Poland, making it significantly harder for the Belarusian government to track them.

Polonia: a divided minority

[Belarus Digest wrote earlier](#) on the ongoing talks between the Belarusian and Polish governments about the reunification of the [two Polish minority associations](#) in Belarus – with the Belarusian authorities vetting the candidates for leadership positions.

The feuding associations, which each call the other 'phantom', publicly reacted to the proposed plan after [Rzeczpospolita](#) also broke this story.



The independent Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB), which enjoys the support of the Polish authorities, has expressed its “strong opposition to the idea of joining the independent UPB with the puppet organisation of the Belarusian authorities under the same name”.

The unregistered association invited the Belarusian government to enter into direct talks about ways to legalise the underground organisation.

Predictably, the government-controlled UPB has welcomed a unification scenario. “We have extended a unifying hand to them, but they sling mud at us and Belarus”, an official of the registered association complained in an interview.

The same official has asserted that the Poland-backed UPB will have to accept the scenario if pressed by their Polish sponsors. The unrecognised UPB is indeed dependent on Polish money. However, few people doubt the personal integrity of its leaders.

The Belarusian government would never allow most of these leaders to assume an important position in a unified organisation. The authorities perceive a strong, uncontrolled, and legally operating association of the Polish Diaspora to be a potential threat to national security.

Can the three thorns be pulled out?

Of the three major problems, only the issue of local border traffic has a chance of being solved in the mid-term. It would, however, require significant funding from the European

Union. Gradual adaptation of Belarusian security agencies to the country's greater openness would also help.

The Polish government will not abandon or modify its Pole's Card programme. The emergence of a strong Union of Poles, which the Belarusian government would recognise but not control, also remains highly unlikely.

The three 'thorns in the flesh' can be pulled out painlessly, or ignored, only when Belarus manages to reform itself to become an economically prosperous and democratic country. Until then, more Belarusians will go to Poland to buy staple goods, work, or resettle; and the secret services will continue to suspect visiting Poles of being spies and treat national minorities as potential traitors.

Poland Lures “the Best Migrants in the World” from Belarus

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers proposed granting residence permits to a million migrants currently in Poland. The majority of them are Ukrainians, followed by Belarusians and Vietnamese.

In recent years Poland has been aiming its immigration policy at absorbing a young labour force from the regions of former Polish rule, and has created unique preferences for foreign citizens in the form of the Card of the Pole. The card gives its holder the right to work and study in Poland, and later to obtain Polish citizenship.

Many Belarusians see it as an opportunity to work and study in Poland with the prospect of getting EU citizenship in the conditions of the ongoing economic crisis. The authorities of Belarus definitely dislike the initiative, but have proved unable to counter it so far.

Poland attracts migrants

On 28 January the Polish Union of Entrepreneurs and Employers in a publication estimated that due to the demographic crisis, by 2050 Poland will need to accept between 2m and 5m migrants to retain current economic growth rates. Currently, around one million people, mainly from Ukraine and Belarus, are employed in the Polish economy. Thanks to them the Polish budget receives an extra €1.5-2bn annually.

In an interview with Gazeta Prawna, union head Cezary Kaźmierczak said that migrants from these countries are “the best in the world”. They do not take away jobs from Poles and cost nothing for taxpayers. He contrasted them to migrants from the Near East and Africa, who in most cases do not work and live on social benefits. As discontent with current EU migration policy grows in Poland, Belarusians and Ukrainians are increasing their chances of becoming resident in Poland.

The Card of the Pole

In 2008 Poland introduced a Law on the Card of the Pole, which targeted the population of lands formerly ruled by Poland in Belarus, Ukraine and the Baltics. The card gives its owner the right to get a long-term free Polish visa, legally work, do business and study in Poland on an equal footing with Polish citizens, as well as offering some other benefits.



To get a card, one needs to demonstrate documented proof of ancestors living in Poland in 1921-1939. Poland at that time included the current western Belarusian territories. Alternatively, one must make a considerable

contribution to Polish culture to receive the card. These criteria makes a few hundred thousand Belarusians potentially eligible for the card.

In 2013 the Polish authorities announced that they had granted the Card of the Pole to 42,000 Belarusians. The current number of card owners in Belarus remains unknown, as Polish officials are reluctant to reveal the latest figures. According to Eurostat, around 70,000 Belarusians have received national long-term visas, which gives an approximate indication of the number of Pole card holders in Belarus.

In November 2015 a special commission of the Polish parliament recommended an amendment to the Law on the Card of the Pole, which would allow its owner to get Polish (and EU) citizenship after living in Poland for only one year. Moreover, the card owners would receive a grant of around €5,400 per family member to cover their adaptation costs, as well as professional and language training.

Initially Poland declared the Card of the Pole a symbolic step to support its nationals abroad, but it has obviously become a purely pragmatic policy – an instrument to absorb the young workforce from neighbouring countries, which cannot go unnoticed by the Belarusian government

Authorities see Card of the Pole as a threat

In 2012 the Constitutional Court of Belarus announced that the Law on the Card of the Pole contradicts international law and violates a number of bilateral agreements. The government also made amendments to the law on the civil service which forbids officials from having a Pole card and similar documents from other states.

[Andrei Jelisiejeŭ](#), migration expert from Belarus, told Belarus Digest that few countries would tolerate the fact that a considerable number of their citizens, including officials, declare themselves loyal to another state. He recalled the reaction of Lithuanian officials to the Card of the Pole law in 2009, when Lithuanian MPs tried to restrict card holders' right to run in parliamentary elections.

The negative reaction of the Belarusian authorities is justified. The Card of the Pole will cause a drain on the Belarusian labour force and strengthen the influence of Poland, a NATO member and ardent critic of Lukashenka, on the Belarusian population.

However, the authorities unwisely stimulate the rush for a Card of the Pole by protracting visa liberalisation with the EU and blocking small [local border traffic](#) with Poland. Many Belarusians would be satisfied just with free Schengen visas [to shop](#) in nearby Poland and Lithuania. With the Card of the Pole they receive a more alluring opportunity to get EU citizenship.

Belarusians are heading west

The economic situation in Belarus [has been worsening](#) for the last two years, and the coming years do not look bright either. Russia, which traditionally served as a [migration hub](#) for many Belarusians, is also declining and in addition getting increasingly aggressive and xenophobic. These developments push Belarusians to look west, to countries with more stable economies and effective rule of law.



Most Belarusians wish to get a Card of the Pole not because of sentimental attachment to Polish culture or pride in their ancestors. They want concrete material benefits – getting free visas with the prospect of receiving a residence permit and later citizenship of the EU, and the ability to work and study on equal terms with Polish citizens in a country with a three times higher average salary. Those who are not ready to move abroad wish at least to get the possibility of shopping and travelling.

Ihar from Minsk, 30, has recently become a happy owner of a Card of the Pole. He told Belarus Digest that among his friends around 10 people already have cards, and it has become increasingly popular among young people. For example, a section of the largest Belarusian Internet forum Onliner dedicated to discussion of ways of getting a Card of the Pole has 3,000 pages – one of the most popular topics on the forum.

Andrej Jelisiejeŭ thinks that the current economic crisis will

definitely cause an outflow of Belarusians towards the west. Those not eligible for a Card of the Pole will use other opportunities, like seasonal works in Poland.

If the Belarusian authorities want to stop the brain drain, they should in the first place enforce local border traffic and make efforts to liberalise or completely remove the visa regime with the EU. In a longer term perspective, the government should think of introducing a similar policy to attract ethnic Belarusians from abroad and provide them with special preferences.