

A U-turn in Poland's policy towards Belarus?

On 20 December, Polish MP Robert Tyszkiewicz publicly stated that Poland will hold parliamentary debates on the future of Belsat, an independent Belarusian TV channel based in Poland.

According to Tyszkiewicz, 'the termination of Belsat TV would mean a U-turn in Polish foreign policy, we would consider this a political mistake.'

Nearly all Polish politicians, journalists, and analysts covering Belarus share this stance. Moreover, Belarusian civil society, including leading figures in the Belarusian Polish minority, condemn the Polish Ministry for Foreign Affairs' proposal to cut support for Belsat.

It appears that due to the growing uproar against the possible closure of Belsat, Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczywski may reverse his decision.

Policy change in the Polish government

A few years ago it would be difficult to imagine that the Polish government would develop such [a good relationship](#) with the Belarusian authorities. In 2016 the [Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs](#), the Deputy Prime Minister and the Head of the upper chamber of the Polish parliament all visited Minsk.

As one Polish diplomat privately told Belarus Digest, 'The Minsk embassy is actually understaffed for such an intense relationship.' It seems that even the President or the Prime Minister of Poland would consider meeting with Lukashenka if

they could ensure it would not damage their reputations.

Together with the thaw in relations between Minsk and  Warsaw, the Polish authorities have begun treating Belarusian pro-democratic groups [with greater scepticism](#). The lack of prospects for political change, along with the decrease in repression, makes Belarus seem like a less urgent cause for many donors.

Nevertheless, few people expected the Polish MFA to be so harsh to Belsat TV. The ministry has not disclosed any information about its plan [to cut next year's support](#) for the channel by two-thirds, although there are only two weeks remaining in 2016. This information first came to light on 15 December thanks to [Agnieszka Romaszewska](#), head of Belsat TV, and was based on her sources.

Ironically, even the Belarusian authorities are not demanding that the Polish side close Belsat; it has in fact become more tolerant of the station. In 2016, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry even accredited four Belsat TV journalists for the first time.

No one is happy with Waszczykowski's idea

On 18 December, Minister Waszczykowski explained that after reformatting Belsat, the Polish government hopes to persuade the Belarusian authorities to allow TVP Polonia to join Belarusian TV cable networks. TVP Polonia is a Polish-language channel tailored to Poles living abroad. This would arguably strengthen the position of Poles living in Belarus.

However, the Polish minority in Belarus has expressed dissatisfaction with this idea. On 19 December, [Anżelika Borys](#), leader of the Union of Poles in Belarus, stated that

'the closure of Belsat will be a blow to Belarusian civil society.'

On the same day, [Andrzej Poczobut](#), another important representative of the Polish minority, published an article in *Gazeta Wyborcza* claiming the Polish foreign policy has lost its credibility, and that 'the closing of Belsat comes at a fatal time and in a fatal style.'

The possible closure of Belsat TV also caught Polish politicians by surprise. Last week, the Commission for Foreign Affairs of the Polish Sejm passed a resolution to support the Belarusian independent media.

Even Robert Winnicki, a prominent Polish nationalist who previously called for the closing of Belsat, sees no point in the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision, as this change would be a move 'from being stupidly anti-Lukashenka to being stupidly pro-Lukashenka'.

Polish analysts are also dismayed. Adam Eberhardt, director of the influential Polish think tank Centre for Eastern Studies, tweeted that 'the possible extinction of Belsat would be a great gesture to Lukashenka. The problem is that he does not usually reciprocate gestures and respect agreements.' According to Witold Jurasz, a Polish analyst and former diplomat in Minsk: 'if the Polish government plans to cut the subsidy for Belsat, I can confirm that someone has gone crazy.'

Needless to say, Belarusian civil society also opposes the Polish minister's decision. Movement for Freedom has launched an online petition addressed to the Polish president which has already been signed by thousands of Belarusians. Opposition groups also held a demonstration in Minsk on 20 December.

While Belarusian civil society wields little influence, the emerging coalition of pro-Belsat politicians, journalists, and analysts may prove more effective. The negative political

fallout of the decision may exceed the desire of Witold Waszczykowski to close Belsat TV.

The two main reasons not to abandon Belsat TV

Why the Belarusian television channel should continue to receive support from the Polish government boils down to two arguments.

Firstly, the closure of Belsat TV will further delay the  democratisation of Belarus and hinder its movement towards the West. Belsat, as well as other projects, plays a large role in supporting Belarusian national identity, and Belarusian identity remains the basis for the existence of a Belarusian state.

Belsat remains for Belarusians the only TV alternative to the official views propagated on Belarusian and Russian television. While the station cannot democratise the country alone, Belsat's journalists play an important role at a grassroots level. For example, in 2016, a corrupt official from Slonim came under investigation thanks to Belsat.

Now, even the Belarusian authorities are feeling the heat of Russian nationalism. Just this week the Belarusian Foreign Ministry officially protested statements by Leonid Reshetnikov, the Kremlin-linked head of the influential Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, who claimed that Belarus remains a part of Great Russia.

It seems that nowadays Lukashenka's regime has more problems with Russian TV broadcasts than with Belsat. The authorities are no longer seriously afraid of a pro-Western colour revolution, but are more concerned about the threat from the East. Incidentally, the Russian-backed Sputnik.by welcomed the

possible closure of Belsat calling it "a remnant of the past".

Secondly, de-funding Belsat will deprive Poland of its most important instrument of influence in Belarus, into which it has already invested around \$40m. Furthermore, Poland will lose its moral credibility. When Polish politicians first launched Belsat TV, they gave speeches about solidarity and alluded to the help Poland received from the Western countries during the communist times.

Poland certainly has a right to set its own foreign policy priorities, but compromising its values and abandoning such a huge project will make Warsaw less credible and predictable to many countries. Diplomats from other Western countries have privately expressed to Belarus Digest their concern over the possibility of such a sharp U-turn.

Over the course of Lukashenka's rule Poland had 12 different foreign ministers. Some of them believed that they could engage Lukashenka and others wanted to isolate him. However, never has the Polish Foreign Ministry come this close to abandoning the long-term moral commitment of Poland to support Belarusian statehood, democracy, and independence.

Polish Organisations in Belarus – Living under Pressure

On 24 August at a congress of Polish Diaspora in Warsaw Poles from Belarus adopted an open letter. The authors of the letter raised the topic of the serious difficulties that the minority faces in the last dictatorship of Europe.

One of the most sensitive issues includes the use of the Card of the Pole, which five years after its introduction still remains controversial. This card issued to ethnic Poles in Belarus gives certain rights to its holders which makes Belarusian authorities nervous.

Warsaw maintains that the Card of the Pole is not intended to make citizens of a particular country disloyal. But Minsk had already taken steps to discredit the whole idea, including using Belarusian courts to show its unlawfulness.

Two Unequal Halves of the Union of Poles

According to the 2009 national census, 295,000 Poles live in Belarus. A decade ago the number was 396 thousand. Apart from the inevitable assimilation processes, Belarusian authorities create obstacles for Polish organisations. The Union of Poles is one of the biggest non-government association in Belarus, yet it cannot function freely within the public sphere and accomplish its goals. This becomes clearer when looking at the story of the Union of Poles.

It was founded in 1990 and according to the official data of the Union, the number of its members is around 25,000 people. The Union of Poles concentrates on cultural activities, charity, but also supports Polish language teachers in Belarus.

Belarusian authorities managed to split the organisation in 2005 by not approving the democratically elected leader, Angelika Borys. Eventually, the official Minsk supported another candidate, Jozef Lucznik who was perceived as more loyal to the regime. As a result of the conflict, Belarusian authorities officially recognised only association led by Jozef Lucznik. That split the organisation into two parts – one recognised and another not recognised by Belarusian authorities.

The successor of Jozef Lucznik, Stanislav Semashko, became controversial when he made public statements which criticised Polish authorities and the Card of the Pole for dividing Poles. This acts made him infamous for being a pro-regime figure and not representing the minority interests.

Today the officially recognised Union of Poles is led by Mieczyslaw Lysy who is also perceived as a regime loyalist. Thus, he cannot solve the problems the Polish minority are concerned about, like discrimination towards them in education and having a free press.

The Card of the Pole: Poles as a Fifth Column?

The Polish parliament introduced the Card of Pole in 2007. The Card confirms that an individual belongs to the ethnic Polish community. Moreover, it guarantees certain rights, such as a visa-free regime when travelling to Poland or right to settlement and work there. From the time of its introduction Minsk has disapproved of it strongly and has worked towards legally rejecting it.

Igor Karpenko, a leader of the parliamentary commission for the issuance of the Card of the Poles, raised a few arguments regarding the Card. One of them pertain to the accusations of Poland interference into the domestic affairs of Belarus and discriminatory division of its citizens. Such positions were also accompanied by the state media and also by some oppositional newspapers. Among the arguments shared by media were those related to the inevitable destabilisation of mutual Belarusian – Polish relations.

Moreover, the outflow of Belarusian youth going to study in Poland is also seen by officials as a threat to Belarusian society. The Card of the Pole simplifies for Belarusian nationals entry into EU countries. The members of the official Union, who did not succeed in receiving the Card, claimed that it would divide the Poles in Belarus. Belarusian officials

also question several legal aspects of the Card. As a consequence, in April 2011 the Belarusian Constitutional Court declared that from the point of view of international law the Card of the Pole is illegal. It caused additional tensions between Warsaw and Minsk.

Education

Poles in Belarus frequently raise the issue of preservation their identity through the teaching of Polish. Authors of the open letter presented during the recent Congress of Poles clearly articulated the problems related to the teaching of Polish. There are only two Polish language schools (in Hrodna and Volkovysk) and the number of schoolchildren learning Polish language has been constantly decreasing.

The repression of the teaching of the Polish language and culture also against the unofficial Union of Poles activists who organise such education, are among the main reasons. Fear of interference by Minsk into education organised by the Poles themselves appears to be a serious problem for activists.

In 29 August the director of a Polish school in Hrodna announced that two classes with Russian language instruction would not be introduced as the local authorities had planned. The school in Hrodna is one of two Polish schools, almost entirely funded by Poland. The parents and Polish activists frequently raised the argument that the introduction of such classes could have brought about the gradual russification of their children.

This case proves that language teaching remains one of the most crucial and simultaneously, very sensitive issues for the Polish minority in Belarus. As the activists claim that the Polish government's support is not enough, another issue is the difficulties that Minsk continues to make with the rights of minorities to organize their own education.

In July, the Belarusian consulate in Bialystok rejected the

visas of two Polish language teachers who were assigned by the Polish Ministry of Education to be sent to Baranavichy region. Due to the financial situation of that school, the actions of Minsk will clearly place the school and its ability to function under further hardship.

Hostages of Politics

Despite these difficulties and decisions, the Polish minority appears to be well organised and has a well-articulated agenda. Nevertheless, pressure from the Belarusian regime hinders the social activity of Poles in Belarus. This is especially true when it speaks openly of its needs and its problems. The very interference by the authorities with the election of a leader of the Union of Poles proves that Minsk does not intend to allow that organisation to slip out of its control.

Moreover, as it happens frequently with national minorities, Poles in Belarus become the prisoners of uneasy [Belarus – Poland relations](#). And thus, spheres of daily life, like education or the press are those which suffer the most from the politicisation of national issues.

Twenty Years of Uneasy Belarus-Poland Relations

Although trade turnover between Poland and Belarus indicates positive trends, numerous problems remain unsolved. Treatment of Polish minority in Belarus and wide spread human rights violations are just a few of them. Nevertheless, both Poland and Belarus have a few serious reasons to establish positive relations.

Warsaw is driven by prestige and even more so by the geopolitics of today's Europe. Belarus place in Europe makes it an important actor where Russian influences play an important role. Polish political elites with scepticism observe Moscow's increasing involvement in Minsk. Another argument is that Warsaw needs to have a stable and predictable neighbour with whom can pursue normal relations, based on the common interests, but also set of certain values. However, Poland's desire to increase mutual cooperation fails to generate mutual feelings in the official Minsk.

A few months ago, 2 March 2012, Belarus and Poland celebrated the 20th anniversary of establishment of their relations. However, the circumstances were not propitious to the celebration. The diplomatic war that began at the end of February, caused tensions on a line Minsk – Warsaw – Brussels. The EU decided to widen the visa sanctions and freeze assets of 21 people who are supportive to the Lukashenka's regime. As a result, Polish ambassador, Leszek Szarepka, and the EU representative were expelled from Minsk. Other diplomats from EU countries soon followed them. It was the most intensive crises in Belarus-EU relations but two months later, the Polish and other ambassadors returned to Belarus.

Brief History of Modern Belarus-Poland Relations

Establishment of Belarus – Poland relations is dated as 27th December 1991, when Warsaw recognised Belarus independence. In June 1992, two states signed the Treaty on Good – Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation, which became a legal foundation of their mutual relations. Poland and Belarus recognised the current borders and expressed no territorial claims. At the beginning of the 1990s both were involved into their internal struggles over the new shape of political and economic realities. Poland, like the Baltic States, turned its efforts to integrate within the West.

Belarus also enjoyed the freedom during its initial years of independence. But since the election of Lukashenka in 1994, Belarus – Poland relations started to cool. Closer political and economic cooperation of Belarus and Russia, further concentration of power in Lukashenka's hand, gradually increased the distance between Minsk and Warsaw.

In the years 1998 – 1999, due to a diplomatic scandal (diplomats were asked to leave their houses in the Drozdy housing estate), Belarusian – Polish relations became particularly uneasy and the Polish ambassador (but also others) left Minsk. The West put visa sanctions against 130 Belarusian officials.

Poland, like Western countries, did not recognise the results of the December 2001 presidential elections and became on that time a serious critics of the internal developments in Belarus. However, when the European Union and United States decided to sharpen the sanctions on Belarus in 2002, Polish authorities disapproved it. Nonetheless, that decade to end up with the serious diplomatic crisis on a line Warsaw – Minsk.

The next presidential elections in December 2010 and subsequent violence against protesters in Minsk, who questioned the fairness of the electoral process and its results, brought about another set of tensions.

Despite political tensions, the mutual trade is growing. In 2010 trade exchange was over \$ 2 bln, and in one year it has increased up to over \$ 3 bln. A number of administrative obstacles effectively hinder the trade turnover. On the Polish side, it might be lack of effective supportive export programme.

On the Belarus side, administrative barriers kept by the Belarusian authorities which render access to the Belarusian market difficult. As a result, the analogous products cannot be imported and certain limitations on the state – owned

enterprises' financial sources remain a serious problem. Nevertheless, trade turnover is again expected to increase in 2012.

The Card of the Pole

Another turmoil arose around the issue of introduction of the Card of the Pole in 2007, a document that approves affiliation to the Polish nation and gives various benefits in Poland such as the right to study or simplified visa procedures. Minsk perceives it as something which undermines its authority and strongly opposes it.

According to statistics, around 400 000 Poles live in Belarus. One of the largest Non-governmental organisations in Belarus is the Union of Poles in Belarus, founded in 1990. Polish activists maintain that the Belarusian authorities impose various restrictions on their activities and imprison activists. Warsaw considers it as discrimination and violation of rights of Polish minority in Belarus. Recent imprisonment of Andrzej Poczobut, a press correspondent of the Polish Gazeta Wyborcza, proves the ongoing conflict between Belarusian authorities and the activists of the Union.

However, the most serious crises took place in 2005. Democratically elected leader of the Union of Poles, Angelika Borys was not recognised by Minsk. Belarusian authorities presented their own candidate which eventually led to the emergence of serious tensions with Warsaw. Since then the Union became divided into two different units. One, unrecognised by the authorities and the other one, with the leader appointed by Minsk.

Poland's Support of Belarusian Activities

Since 2006, the Polish government has opened the Kalinowski Scholarship Fond in order to support the students expelled from the Belarusian universities. It is fully sponsored by the state budget. So far nearly 700 Belarusian students either

participated and or are still are enrolled in the programme.

Like [Vilnius](#), Warsaw has become also a home to the opposition activists and some of their initiatives (as for example, the Belarusian House). Moreover, Polish public television company founded the Belsat TV, which transmits its programme to Belarus. Sociological surveys show that around half million adult Belarusians watch Belsat on a regular basis. This initiative is sponsored mainly by the Polish government is the main support of the project and donates over 16 mln Polish zloty (\$4.7mln). Poland hosts also two other radio stations broadcasting in Belarusian – Radio Racyja and the European Radio Belarus.

Poland is one of the main EU countries that are vitally interested in internal developments in Belarus. Its geopolitical location which could appear as a buffer zone for Russia, opportunities for increasing trade exchange, but first of all, stability and predictability of Belarusian political centre prove to be constantly key issues to Poland. Warsaw efforts aimed at keeping the issue of Belarus on the EU's agenda.

For the same reasons Belarus needs Warsaw. Nevertheless, Warsaw has certain difficulty in finding the way to speak with the current Belarusian political regime. Despite political disagreements between Poland and Belarusian authorities the truth is that there is much more that may unite these two countries rather than divide them.

Russia, NATO and Belarus:

Real Money and Unreal Threats

✘ For Belarus, an agreement between Russia and NATO will once again underline the problem of being outside this process of pan-European integration. Belarus can not continue to be a black hole between Russia and Western Europe. The Belarusian government can't afford to play on the contradictions between them and can't rely on the support of only one of these subjects any more.

The confrontation between Russia and NATO after the collapse of the Soviet Union has always been a political chess game, in fact, somewhat devoid of real motivation. It is obvious that the possibility of a real armed conflict between modern Russia and Western Europe is entirely unrealistic. The tough talk on the regulation of armaments and the stationing of troops has always sounded unnatural.

The real agenda of these talks has always been the desire of both parties (especially Russia) to save face in the course of reformatting relations on the continent after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Treaty Organization. The rapid expansion of NATO, which until recently was openly seen as an enemy, was immediately seen as a defeat for the Russian leadership. Former Soviet satellites (and even former republics of the USSR) joining NATO meant their escape from Russia's sphere of influence – or at seemed so. All this harmed the domestic image of the Russian government and embittered the post-imperial sentiment of public opinion in the country.

At some point in the early 1990s the West seems to have missed the right moment to invite Russia become member of the alliance and to start building up the European security system involving all affected parties. Therefore the process had required some time to ripen, which eventually took more than one and a half decades.

The phantom possibility of war with the NATO has all these years been a dubious argument in the internal politics of Russia.

Certain conservative political forces have been the most active to emphasize this threat: hard core Soviet hawks in think tanks close to the government, the military lobby of the Soviet-era generals. In addition, the Russian public opinion has been walking away from Soviet stereotypes quite slowly, while mastering the market economy and Western standards of consumption. It seems, though, that in a way there has been a somewhat symmetric situation in the U.S., with a Cold-War-mindset dominating a large part of the policy making.

The progress in relations between Russia and the NATO has only become possible after an overall political and economic stabilization in Russia, as well as a change of generations. There is reason to believe that these things have more or less been achieved now. The recent economic crisis, in turn, has stimulated Russia to compromise and calmed down the conservative revenge pathos among Russian political circles.

In the security sphere, Russia and the West have quite obvious common interests, that are far more real and serious than any differences and political games.

The fight against terrorism, maintaining stability in Central Asia requires the active cooperation and it is good that Russia and NATO have finally come to this.

In this context, the recent demonstrative refusal of the Belarusian authorities to sign the agreement on the joint Russian-Belarusian regional military group looks naive and helpless.

For Russia, the military block with Belarus is of very small value in terms of guaranteeing real security. Moreover, by sponsoring Belarus' military, Russia has to spend real money in order to be protected from an extremely unrealistic threat.

With declarations of readiness to protect Russia from NATO's tanks with their bodies, the foreign political rhetoric of the current Belarusian government in this regard is irrelevant.

Belarus needs to change its relations with the West and with Russia. Ahead of the presidential election coming up in December it is now the best time to once again think about this.

[Read the original article here](#)

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How Much Having an Embassy in Minsk Costs

It is hardly a secret that establishing diplomatic relations with an authoritarian state is a gamble. One never knows what one's embassy in Minsk may suffer if it crosses swords with the Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

On the night of August 30, two Molotov cocktails were thrown into the compound of the Russian Embassy in Minsk. Three days later, an obscure anarchist group said the attack was a reaction to Russia's crackdown on activists protesting the plans for a new highway around Moscow. But the uproar caused by the bombing is unlikely to end so simply and so quickly.

In fact, it is unclear whether the attack was an act of hooliganism or a premeditated political move. Political or not, once it happened, the incident has become a part of the whirlpool of politics. It is interesting to observe of what Russia and Belarus make of the attack to advance their

political goals.

The initial rumor that the embassy was attacked by the Belarusian hooligans in response to the Russian movie "Godfather" seems to have already played out in Lukashenka's favor. Whether or not they are true, the rumors of this sort will undoubtedly help Lukashenka gain additional support in the upcoming presidential elections.

Incidentally, a high percentage of the Belarusian population choose not to believe the movie and continued to stand by Lukashenka. Instead, these people are likely to believe Lukashenka's claim that the embassy attack was the work of Russian agents. The Belarusian police has been seriously considering the possibility that Russia bombed its own embassy to escalate the so-called "media war" with Belarus. According to Lukashenka, as quoted by Interfax, the Russian "thugs and scoundrels" needed the attack to say, "Look at the [Belarusian] government, at Lukashenka, who almost himself masterminded this terrorist act, as they call it, and torched the Russian embassy car."

More careful with language, the Russian Foreign Ministry somewhat vaguely accused "certain forces" of trying to "bring distrust and tensions to [Russia-Belarus] bilateral relations." Moscow seems to be viewing Lukashenka's claim as yet one more sign that its former strategic partner cannot be trusted, is unreliable, and even, at times, irrational.

This view will unlikely result in Moscow's throwing its weight behind the Belarusian opposition all of a sudden. The Kremlin knows that Lukashenka will remain in power for the indefinite future and has to learn to work with him, foreseeing and mitigating the consequences of his vagaries. To make such vagaries less frequent, Moscow is already becoming less shy about applying economic and political pressure. Of course, the Belarusian leader has so far excelled at turning even this pressure to his benefit, increasing his popularity by claiming

that Moscow “wanted the [Belarusian] president to bend [to their will] – but they got just the opposite.”

This is not the first attack on a foreign embassy in the Belarusian capital. The previous embassy accidents had either happened in the midst of a diplomatic crisis between the Belarus and that embassy’s home country, or were suspiciously close to presidential elections in Belarus.

In 2001, a few months before Lukashenka’s reelection, a grenade blew a 17-centimeter hole in the Russian embassy grounds as leaders of former Soviet republics, including Russian leader Vladimir Putin, were flocking to Minsk for a summit of the Commonwealth of Independent States. The Belarusian regime was able to turn the 2001 incident to its advantage. Minsk upped the pressure on the opposition by having the KGB interrogate the leader of the “Youth Front,” Paval Sevyarynets, as a suspect.

Interestingly, the embassies of the democratic countries in Minsk seem to have much more civilized incidents with the Belarusian government (although with far greater consequences). In 2008, angered by the continuation of US sanctions against Belnaftakhim and by US criticism of Belarus’ human rights violations, Belarusian authorities gave US ambassador Karen Stewart 24 hours to leave the country before she would be declared persona non grata. Shortly afterward, Washington was accused of organizing a spy ring in Belarus and was [asked](#) to cut the staff of its 35-employee embassy in Minsk by half. A month later, ten more US diplomats were ordered to leave.

In 2006, as Belarusian-Polish relations reached a yet another low, Belarus’ state-controlled media accused the Polish embassy in Minsk of mediating between the Belarusian opposition and the West. Throughout the last decade, Poland was accused of spying in Minsk just as often as the human rights abuses and repressions in Belarus were denounced by

Warsaw.

No Official Mourning In Belarus After Death of Kaczyński So Far

✘ Today Belarus is the only country in the region that has not declared a day of national mourning following the death of the Polish president in a plane crash Apr. 10. Lithuania, Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Russia have all declared mourning, and events in Lech Kaczynski's memory will be held by the EU official bodies. Even Brazil and [Canada](#) have joined in. However, the Belarusian government has so far limited its reaction to a brief statement of condolences.

To the contrary, the Belarusian civil society is actively expressing its solidarity with Poland. Many people have come to the Polish embassy to lay flowers (see a photo [report](#) by *Naša Niva*), and the leaders of both the Orthodox and the Catholic Church in Belarus have held memorial services.

The Belarusian authorities did help Poland after the plane crash. An airplane with relatives of the victims of Saturday's tragedy landed in the Viciebsk airport, and the Belarusian government provided the relatives of the victims with a visa-free entry into Belarus as well as a transportation means to Smolensk.

It seems that nothing more should be expected from the Belarusian officials. Poland was and remains an unfriendly country to Aliaksandr Lukashenka's regime. After all, Warsaw actively supports the democratic opposition in Belarus and

criticizes human rights violations and repressions against the Union of Poles of Belarus. In addition to that, the Polish state television sponsors independent Belarusian satellite TV channel Belsat.

Lech Kaczyński's unwillingness to contact the Belarusian authorities could have been one of the reasons why the pilots of the Polish presidential plane [refused](#) to land in Minsk, neglecting the advice of the Russian dispatchers at Smolensk airport.

On the day of the funeral ceremonies, flags on official buildings in Germany will be lowered to half-mast. On Monday, the EU flags in front of the EU and EC buildings in Brussels, Strasbourg, as well as capitals of all the 27 EU states were lowered to half-mast in sign of mourning.

The Council of Europe has also declared Monday a day of mourning and lowered flags in front of its seat in Strasbourg. In front of NATO headquarters in Brussels, the Polish flag was hoisted half-mast since Saturday. On Monday, flags there were lowered by Lithuania, Estonia and Great Britain.

A number of countries declared national mourning. Among them are Brazil and Lithuania, which declared a three-day mourning. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Turkey will mourn the Polish president on the day of his funeral. Estonia, Ukraine, Spain, and Latvia have declared mourning on Monday. In Moldova, national mourning will be observed on Tuesday. Flowers were laid and candles were lit in front of the Polish mission in Minsk, the capital of Belarus.

[Read the story at People's Daily.](#)

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.

VC & YK

How can Brussels Help the Union of Poles?



Gone is the time when Belarusians were one of the smaller ethnic groups in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. And it is clear that the decades of Soviet rule made Belarus lose the traits that the *Rech Pospolita* was so famous for: ethnic diversity, religious tolerance, and democratic attributes of political system.

A brief thaw in the Belarusian-Polish relations came to an end once the Belarusian authorities cracked down on the Union of Poles in Belarus. Forty ethnic Poles in Belarus have been arrested, some sentenced to five-day jail terms, and Andzelika Borys, the leader of the Union of Poles, was fined for \$360.

On February 17, the Belarusian court ruled that the Union's headquarters must be turned over to a pro-Minsk Polish group that is not recognized by Warsaw. In short, the Union of Poles has suffered the fate of a typical Belarusian NGO.

Polish President Lech Kaczyński and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, who had in the past led the European effort to improve relations with Belarus, both chastised Minsk over its boorish behavior with regard to ethnic minorities. EU Parliament President Jerzy Buzek, a Pole, also called on Minsk to mind its manners when dealing with NGOs.

Even the EU's foreign representative Catherine Ashton joined in and warned that Belarus' place in the Eastern Partnership will be jeopardized if Minsk persists in violating minority rights. She said she was very "disappointed." Unfortunately, Ashton's "disappointment" will hardly make to Belarusian leadership lose sleep. Neither will it help the Belarusian Poles and other civil-society groups in Belarus sleep better and feel safer.

In the unequal match between the Union of Poles in Belarus and the Russia-Belarus Union state it is clear who will prevail. Of course, the Union of Poles has the entire EU on its side. But as long as Brussel's continues to seek improvement in its relations with Minsk more than Minsk itself does, the EU's support for human rights in Belarus will matter little.

Reaching out to Belarus as it bites the offering hand is ineffective at best and counterproductive at worst. It will not take this hand in earnest unless it indeed needs to be rescued, as had happened for a brief period in the beginning of the global economic crisis when the opportunity was missed.

The Union of Poles Mistreated in Belarus

Ethnic Poles rising in western Belarus was what Minsk and Moscow happened to choose as a scenario for their 2009 joint military exercise. As if ashamed of its lack of judgment last year, the Belarusian leadership is now doing everything possible to make such a far-fetched plot more plausible.

On February 8, Belarusian police burst into the Polish House in Iryanets, owned by the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), and

ordered the staff to vacate the building. This wasn't the first attack on the Union of Poles and the Polish House by the Belarusian authorities. In 2005, Hrodna militia took the office of the Union of Poles forcing a change of leadership.

In January, Minsk also started a criminal prosecution against Taresa Sobal, the director of Polish House in Ivianiec. Sobal is being accused of failing to properly register a 2004 financial grant received by the Polish House from the former leader of Polish Union Tadevush Kruchkouski.

Actions of the Belarusian authorities evoked sharp criticism by the president of the EU Parliament Jerzy Buzek, who is Polish. Speaking in Stasbourg on Feb. 10, Buzek urged Minsk "to stop taking drastic measures against the Polish minority." He said "acceptance of EU norms with regard to ethnic minorities" was essential for improving the EU-Belarus discourse. Outraged by Minsk's treatment of the Polish cultural group, Poland recalled its Ambassador to Belarus

Henryk Litwin for consultations. In its turn, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Belarus has complained to Litwin over Poland's statements regarding the oppression of the Belarusian Poles.

Poles constitute the third largest ethnic group in the country after Belarusians and Russians. There are 12 newspapers and magazines in Polish and 2 schools (in Hrodna and Valkavysk). With about 20,000-members, 75 registered primary organizations, and 17 "Polish Houses," the Union of Poles in Belarus is the largest public association of a national minority in Belarus. Founded in Hrodna in 1988, it aspires to promote the Polish language and traditions.

In 2005, the ZPB split, with a pro-Minsk alternative registered as the Union of Belarusian Poles. The unrecognized branch of ZPB elected Anzhelika Borys as its chairwoman; the recognized and pro-Minsk branch elected Stanislau Syamashka.

Warsaw recognizes Borys's ZPB as the sole legal representative of the Polish minority in Belarus, but the Belarusian government favors the union led by Syamashka.

According to the web site of the Belarusian Embassy in the United States, the issue "lies outside the sphere of inter-ethnic relations or those between the state and the Polish national minority in Belarus." Blaming the power struggle among the leaders of the Union, the Embassy claims that "instead of seeking a solution to this situation, complicated in terms of law, one of the conflicting sides started to actively politicize the situation and brought the conflict inside the Union to the international level."

According to the Embassy, "maintaining sustainable inter-religious and inter-ethnic peace is what the Belarusian state can pride itself on." Article 15 of the Belarusian Constitution requires the state to "bear responsibility for preserving the historic, cultural and spiritual heritage, and the free development of the cultures of all the ethnic communities that live in the Republic of Belarus." Such exemplary behavior has rarely been the case in Belarus, however.

The position of the Polish minority in Belarus started to worsen after a 1995 referendum, which reintroduced Soviet-era symbols and Russian language as a second national language of Belarus. In 1997, the Belarusian authorities accused the Union of Poles of organizing political provocations, and in 1999 the Union complained of being discriminated to the representatives of the Polish parliament. Authors of the 2003 assessment by the Minorities at Risk Project warned the situation was "likely to deteriorate in the future" as Belarus grew dependent on Russia. So far, this prediction has proven accurate.

Polish presence on what today constitutes Belarusian territory started to form in the times of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth

between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (1569-1795). The Commonwealth was partitioned by its neighbors Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the late 18th century. Most of the future Belarus was annexed by the Russian Empire. As a result of the 1921 Treaty of Riga, Polish influence over the Western Belarus was restored for nearly two decades. However, in 1939 the Soviet Union invaded Poland under the terms of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with Germany, and West Belarus was incorporated into the Belarusian SSR. After the WWII, the Poles who remained on the Belarusian territory faced four decades of Soviet repressions and discrimination.

Repressions against Media in the Wake of Presidential Elections in Belarus



As presidential elections are getting closer, Belarus authorities have stepped up their efforts to silence media not under their control. Over the last few days, the Council of Ministers imposed additional restrictions on accreditation of foreign media, the President of Belarus adopted a decree imposing new limitations on internet providers and earlier today police raided the informal office of Warsaw-based Belsat television channel. The office is

informal because the authorities refuse to give Belsat accreditation.

Control over media is crucial for any authoritarian regime's survival. Belarus authorities have effectively shut down all meaningful alternative media within the country years ago. Although a few independent newspapers are still allowed to circulate in the country, they do not have any real impact on public opinion. Heavily subsidized state-controlled television, radio and printed periodicals completely dominate the media market of Belarus.

On the first day of February, after months of speculations, Belarus President signed a decree aimed at restricting activities of internet providers in Belarus. The decree makes it easier for Belarus special services to access information transmitted via Internet. The decree also requires internet providers to store the data of individual internet users, which could be later retrieved by Belarus authorities.

The Council of Ministers of Belarus has also restricted distribution of foreign media in Belarus. Among other things, the government has forbidden to distribute any "foreign products" which contain information "the distribution of which is forbidden or access to which is limited in accordance with legislative acts of the Republic of Belarus". This effectively means that any state organ may outlaw foreign periodicals without even having to give any explanations.

Both the decree and the Council of Ministers' regulations will be subject of future interpretations by the courts and other state bodies. It is unclear how zealous they will be in enforcing these new rules.

What is clear is that the Belarus authorities are trying to restrict access to foreign media, because they see it as a real threat to their political monopoly. Another brick in the information wall they are building is an attempted raid of Belsat office in Minsk. Belsat is an independent satellite

channel headquartered in Poland. It is the only Belarusian-language TV broadcaster not under the government control. The number of people who can actually watch Belsat it is relatively small because of the expense of installing a satellite dish. However, it the broadcaster gaining more popularity and is perhaps the most influential independent electronic media in Belarus.

Last month, a large number of international organizations and NGOs protested against a warning, which the Ministry of Justice issued to the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ). This warning may potentially lead to closure of this organization. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe has even devoted a special paragraph in its recent resolution condemning pressure on the BAJ. But instead of listening, the Belarusin authorities put even more pressure on independent media.

There is nothing new for the Belarusian authorities in resolutions full of condemnations or even in economic sanctions, which make Belarus even more dependent on Russia. What Europe and the United States have not yet tried, is to take the issue of supporting foreign-based media seriously. This includes increasing FM- and TV broadcasting from the neighboring countries, so that Belarus population has access to uncensored information.

**Russian-Belarusian exersices
made Poland ask for help from**

US

✘ Poland's foreign minister called upon the US to deploy its troops on the territory of the country to defend it from military aggression.

During a conference in Washington Radoslaw Sikorski reminded that recently Russia and Belarus held joint military exercises not far from the Polish territory, where hundreds of tanks took part. As said by him, now there are only 6 US soldiers in Poland, BBC informs.

"There are 900 tanks on one side and only six soldiers on other. Could you be calm in this situation?" Reuters quotes Sikorski.

The minister noted that when Poland joined the NATO, Russia received assurances that the alliance won't send considerable NATO forces to the region. "But nobody imagined at this time that no forces would be put in whatsoever. And so this is I think the job that is going to need to be done," the minister said.

Experts note that many people in Poland were disappointed by the decision of the US not to deploy anti-missile system elements in Poland.

Washington's plans to place anti-missile system elements in Poland and the Czech Republic caused extreme discontent of Russia which found them aimed against its strategic interests. However, Washington underlined that the new system was to defend Europe and the US from possible missile blow from such countries as Iran.

Barack Obama, a new US president, reconsidered the decisions of the previous US administration and stated that he would create more effective missile shield without radars and anti-missile systems in Eastern Europe. However both in Russia and

in the West this step was viewed as a concession to Russia made as a result of “rebooting” in the relations between Moscow and Washington.

Sikorski noted that US vice president John Biden who recently visited Poland, assured Warsaw that Washington is still its strategic partner. However as said by the head of the Polish Foreign Ministry, acts speak louder than words.

“If you can still afford it, we need some strategic reassurance,” Sikorski said.

Source: <http://charter97.org/en/news/2009/11/5/23413>

Image source: <http://www.crossed-flag-pins.com>

Belarus May Win from the Change of US Missile Defense Plans



On Sept. 17, to Russia’s satisfaction and to Poland’s chagrin, President Obama announced canceling US plans to build a missile base in Poland and a radar system in the Czech Republic. The revelation came on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland and was widely seen as US betrayal of its Eastern European ally.

For Belarus, however, the date marked a second week of Zapad 2009 military exercise, in which Belarus and Russia fought an enemy armed to NATO standards and attacking from the West. There can be little doubt of what enemy they were preparing to counter. Fortunately, the change of US plans on missile

defense in Europe has made the actualization of this disturbing scenario less likely.

While President Barack Obama hardly remembered Belarus when deliberating the issue, his decision may have a positive effect on Belarus' relationship with Poland and the European Union as a whole. The US decision on missile defense signals a more cautious stance on NATO expansion. If last year Ukraine's NATO membership and consequent Russian outrage seemed probable, now it is now clear that decades may pass until Belarus borders a NATO state in the south.

The agreement to station ten missile defense interceptors on Polish soil to counter potential Iranian attack was signed between the United States and Poland on August 20, 2008, – immediately after the Russia-Georgia clash over the separatist region of South Ossetia. In return for Polish hospitality, Washington was to provide Warsaw with 20 Patriot missiles – facing Moscow and, of course, Minsk. Strongly opposed to U.S. plans, Russia threatened to deploy ballistic missiles in Kaliningrad and/or Belarus. The missiles could be stationed at the air base Machulishchy, near Minsk.

Had the US plans actualized, Russia would have probably proceeded to place its weapons on the Belarusian territory, forcing the country to the forefront of the East-West confrontation. As a result, Belarus' participation in the Eastern Partnership would have come to an end, and its relations with the international community would have rapidly deteriorated.

With no American rockets in Poland, an opportunity to mend Minsk's relationship with Warsaw and Brussels has emerged. How much Belarus will benefit from the cancellation of US missile defense system in Europe depends on its willingness to overcome additional obstacles to the Minsk-E.U. rapport – Belarus' authoritarianism, disregard for human rights, and

economic dependence on Russia.

In the nearly two decades of Belarus' "independent" policymaking, its relationship with the West tended to reflect the dynamics of Russian-US relationship rather than the preferences of the Belarusian people or even Belarusian national interest. Although the country of Belarus' size and geopolitical location must be advised to follow neutrality, Belarus has increasingly put itself on the front line of confrontation between Russia and the West.

The Belarusian leadership must realize that close military cooperation with a state as unpopular as Russia entails excessively high risks. Like the United States, which was unwilling to come to Georgia's rescue last summer, Russia is unlikely to prioritize the protection of satellites that are made targets by its own actions. On the crossroads between the East and West, Belarus should aim at becoming a bridge in the security architecture of the post-Cold War Europe rather than a battlefield for the United States and Russia to resolve their conflicts.

The National Endowment for Democracy hosts an event on Belarus



The International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and RFE/RL invite you to a

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Alyaksandr Klaskouski *Director of Analytical Projects, BelaPAN
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Introduced by

Rodger Potocki *Director for Europe and Eurasia, National
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Please RSVP by email to <bobbiet@ned.org> or

by telephone to (202) 378-9525.

Despite the controversial September 2008 parliamentary elections in Belarus, which were widely denounced by western observers as undemocratic, the European Union has followed through on pre-election pledges to loosen travel restrictions on Belarusian government officials, including President Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Over the past year, Belarus has taken steps to release political prisoners and says it wants improved relations with the West. Is Belarus, which continues to actively repress domestic criticism and has reportedly offered to host Russian missiles on its territory, sincere in its stated wish to improve relations with Europe and America?

Olga Kazulina is the daughter of political prisoner and former

presidential candidate

Alyaksandr Kazulin, who was arrested in March 2006 and sentenced to 5 1/2 years of imprisonment for his political actions against the Lukashenko regime. She is a member of the Social Democratic Party and the commission "Freedom for Kazulin and All Political Prisoners." Ms. Kazulina was the deputy director of the firm Alaktiv from 2005 until 2007, when she was fired after attending an opposition conference in Lithuania.

Alyaksandr Klaskouski is Director of Analytical Projects for the news agency BelaPAN and Editor-in-Chief of BelaPAN's Elections website. He also runs a popular political blog for the e-weekly *Nasha Niva* and writes a column for *Naviny.by*. Mr. Klaskouski is a regular contributor to RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelSat, a Warsaw-based satellite television channel. Both speakers are in the U.S. at the invitation of the International Republican Institute to participate in events marking International Human Rights Day.

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