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 Szerepka, 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 ambassador 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 unease 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.