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A Difficult Neighbourhood with Hybrid War in the Background: An Analysis of Relations between Poland and Belarus

Abstract: Belarus has been dependent on the Russian Federation for many reasons for years. The possibilities for shaping its foreign policy are also very limited. Nevertheless, until recently, mutual relations with Poland still functioned, despite being complicated and not without difficult periods. However, the events related to the situation in Belarus after the rigged presidential elections in 2020, the enormity of the repression of representatives of the Belarusian opposition, parts of the media and ordinary citizens, the involvement of Belarus on the Russian side in its aggression against Ukraine, the hybrid war launched in mid-2021 consisting of the instrumental use of migrants for political purposes, and the subsequent packages of sanctions imposed by the European Union in response to these illegal and shameful actions raise legitimate questions about the future of mutual relations between Warsaw and Minsk. For this reason, it seems important to analyse the relations between Belarus, ruled continuously since 1997 by Lukashenko, and Poland.

Keywords: crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border, hybrid war, Poland–Belarus relations

Introduction

Poland's political relations with Belarus since both countries' independence in 1991 have been characterized by relatively low activity, compared to relations with other eastern neighbours. Despite Poland and Belarus having a common historical and cultural heritage, mutual relations between the two countries are very difficult due to geopolitical conditions, Poland's accession to the EU and NATO, and the simultaneous creation of a dictatorship in Belarus by Lukashenko's regime – which today is closer to Putin's Russia than to western democracies. Nearly 35 years of mutual

political relations between Poland and Belarus have been characterized by cyclical periods of conflict and disappointment, alternating with short periods of warming in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, Belarus's support for Russia in the war in Ukraine, the actions of the Belarusian regime in the hybrid war with Poland and the EU, and Lukashenko's preparations for his seventh term as president raise questions about the future of mutual political relations.

1. The beginning of mutual relations (until the end of the 1990s)

The turn of the 1980s into the 1990s brought the collapse of the USSR. As a result of the coup in Moscow by Yanayev in August 1991, the Belarusian parliament adopted the Act on the Independence of Belarus as a State on 25 August (Karski, 2015, pp. 127, 144; Sobczak, 1994, pp. 32–33). The Polish Sejm already referred to this in a resolution of 31 August, and on 27 December 1991, Poland was one of the first countries in the world to officially recognize the independence of Belarus (Zięba, 2010, p. 226). It is worth emphasizing that the first Polish–Belarusian interstate contacts took place in 1991. On 10–11 October that year, a delegation of the Belarusian government headed by Prime Minister Kiebiecz arrived in Poland, during which a declaration on good neighbourliness, mutual understanding and cooperation was concluded, among others, which was the first Polish–Belarusian document regulating interstate relations (Stolarczyk, 1998, p. 251). In turn, on 2–3 March 1992, a working visit of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Belarus, Kravchenko, took place in Warsaw, during which a declaration on establishing mutual diplomatic relations was signed (Stolarczyk, 1998, p. 255). On 23 June 1992 the heads of both states, Wałęsa and Shushkevich, signed a treaty in Warsaw on good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation. They confirmed, *inter alia*, the inviolability of the border and a lack of mutual territorial claims. On the basis of state succession, the former Polish–Soviet border was recognized as the Polish–Belarusian border (Góralczyk et al., 2024, pp. 225–226).

After a period of recovery in 1992–1993, Polish–Belarusian interstate political relations reached an impasse in the following years. As Zięba (2010, p. 230) rightly points out, the years 1993–1994 brought clear signals about the different geopolitical concepts of the two countries. In response to Poland's aspirations to join NATO, the Belarusian side expressed concern about the prospect of direct proximity to the North Atlantic Alliance (Zięba, 2010, p. 230). Moreover, on 5 January 1994, the president of the Supreme Council of Belarus, Shushkevich, who was considered a moderately pro-western politician, was dismissed (Zięba, 2010, p. 230). In the summer of 1994, the first – and so far only – completely free presidential elections were held in Belarus, as a result of which Lukashenko became president.¹ However, the first deci-

1 Alexander Grigoryevich Lukashenko (Belarusian: Аляксандр Рыгоравіч Лукашэнка, Russian: Александр Григорьевич Лукашенко), born 30 August 1954 in Koryuś, Belarusian politician,

sions of the newly elected president aroused justified concern on the Polish side because he initiated a policy of reintegration with Russia, which was manifested, among others, by the signing of an agreement on the establishment of an association between Russia and Belarus on 2 April 1996. In the same year, the internal situation in Belarus also worsened, as Lukashenko extended his term of office by one-and-a-half years and also removed the opposition from the Belarusian parliament (Zięba, 2010, p. 233). These actions were accompanied by systematic restrictions on civil liberties, which hit Poles living in Belarus, among others. In November 1996, the president changed the constitution of Belarus, significantly strengthening his position in the country, and limited media freedom (Czachor, 2011, pp. 236–244). It should be emphasized at this point that on 12 March 1999, Poland officially became a member of NATO, which was met with a cold reception by the Belarusian authorities. In 1999, Lukashenko failed to organize the next presidential elections in Belarus, and he considered activities by the opposition related to their organization an attempt to commit a *coup d'état*. It should be stressed that these factors, among others, formed the basis for the method used by Poland since the late 1990s towards Belarus, the so-called policy of 'critical dialogue', which consisted in criticizing the violation of the principles of a democratic state of law, fundamental human rights and civil liberties, while maintaining contacts with the Belarusian authorities at the working level (Czachor, 2013, p. 263).

2. Mutual relations until 2020

In the autumn of 2000, parliamentary elections were held in Belarus, which were boycotted by part of the opposition due to restrictions on access to the media and the registration of candidates. After his re-election in 2001, Lukashenko tried to change the attitude of western countries towards him, but to no avail.² In the autumn of 2002, the Belarusian authorities took actions that hindered the activities of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe mission in Minsk. In response, some EU countries even recognized him as a *persona non grata* at the end of 2002 and the start of 2003 (Czachor, 2013, p. 263).

Further problems in mutual relations appeared in connection with the adoption of the Accession Treaty – which imposed an obligation to introduce visas for Belarusian citizens – and Poland's upcoming accession to the EU. At the end of 2004, as a re-

president of Belarus since 1994.

2 Lukashenko has won elections four more times: in 2006, 2010, 2015 and 2020, and thus has ruled Belarus continuously since 1994. Due to numerous cases of electoral fraud in each election, persecution of the opposition and the remnants of an independent media, and, above all, acceptance of human rights' violations by the apparatus of his power, Lukashenko is nowadays called 'the last dictator of Europe'.

sult of the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, the Belarusian regime further intensified its repression of the opposition, the media and independent associations, including one of the largest organizations, the Union of Poles in Belarus (Zięba, 2010, p. 238). This crisis in mutual relations lasted until the end of 2007.

The year 2008 brought a temporary improvement in relations. Due to the reduction of repression in Belarus, Poland supported the idea of including the country in the Eastern Partnership programme it had initiated (Zięba, 2010, p. 239). As Kubin (2013, p. 176) notes, in the autumn of 2008 it seemed that the EU's sanctions policy towards the Lukashenko regime and its political environment was beginning to bring specific results. Before the parliamentary elections of 28 September 2008, Lukashenko released some political prisoners and agreed to the state-wide distribution of two independent newspapers and to the registration of the opposition movement 'For Freedom' (Kubin, 2013, p. 176). In November 2008, the EU Council even suspended some of the sanctions against Belarus. Another manifestation of the improvement in mutual relations was the inclusion of Belarus in the Eastern Partnership (Council of the European Union, 2009). It should be recalled that in 2010, on Poland's initiative, a bilateral agreement on local border-traffic rules was signed and ratified, which simplified the crossing of the Polish–Belarusian border for people living in those areas. However, the Belarusian side blocked the agreement coming into force (Fedorowicz, 2020a, p. 27).

But this recovery did not last long. After the brutal repression of peaceful protesters, the democratic opposition and civil society following the Belarusian presidential elections in 2010, another difficult moment came in mutual relations. As Dalinczuk (2021, p. 25) notes, in 2011–2012, the Belarusian state media attacked the Polish authorities and its eastern policy, expelling Polish ambassador Szerepka and EU ambassador Mor in response to the extension of sanctions by the EU in February 2012. Despite the tough attitude of the EU and Poland towards the Belarusian authorities, the overall situation in the country has not improved. Moreover, there has been no progress towards the democratization of Belarus.

From 2015, mutual relations revived once again. The Belarusian authorities released the last people considered by the EU as political prisoners, and at the same time Belarus became involved in the peace process in Ukraine, which resulted in the possibility of renewing diplomatic contacts with EU representatives (Dyner, 2016). In 2016, Waszczykowski, the then Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, paid an official visit to Belarus and talked with Lukashenko, while Makei, the Belarusian Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited Warsaw three times from 2014 (Dalinczuk, 2021, p. 25). Moreover, in 2016–2017, four Poland–Belarus interparliamentary meetings were held, which, according to Yelisseyeu (2017, p. 171), was a new trend in bilateral relations, because previously Poland had largely ignored official contacts with the undemocratic Belarusian parliament.

3. Polish–Belarusian relations after the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections

However, the presidential elections in Belarus that took place in August 2020, and the subsequent unacceptable actions of Lukashenko's regime towards the opposition and protesting demonstrators, put a final end to another cautious opening in relations between Poland and the EU and Belarus. The first protests in Belarus began on 29 May 2020 in Minsk and other cities, initially as a reaction to the arrest of opposition presidential candidates and thus their exclusion from participation in the August elections (Bieńczak, 2020). On 9 August 2020, the elections were held, as a result of which – once again – Lukashenko was re-elected. After the publication of the first official polls confirming Lukashenko's alleged crushing victory in the first round, protests spread to many cities across the country; their main goal was a fair recount of votes and the resignation of Lukashenko (Kropman & Saakov, 2020). Security forces began to disperse peaceful protests using force, which resulted in clashes with the Belarusian OMON – a riot police force under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Belarus that specialized in combat and patrolling in urban areas, counter-revolutionary, covert operation, crowd control and internal security. The Belarusian authorities carried out actions involving mass arrests of civilians. There were also reports in the international media about torture in detention and victims' accounts of physical and mental abuse by representatives of the militia and OMON (Do Rzeczy, 2020). From the beginning of the clashes with security forces until 19 August 2020, three deaths were officially confirmed and almost 80 people disappeared without a trace. It should be emphasized that after these elections, Poland supported the Belarusian opposition; its leader Tsikhanouskaya was received in Warsaw by the then prime minister Morawiecki, and within two months over 700 Belarusians came to Poland under special conditions (Polska Agencja Prasowa, 2020).

In October 2020, the EU Council imposed sanctions on 40 individuals found responsible for the repression and intimidation of peaceful protesters, opposition members and journalists following the 2020 presidential elections and for irregularities in the electoral process (Council of the European Union, 2020c), and added a further 15 Belarusians and authorities in November, including Lukashenko and his son and national security adviser Viktor Lukashenko (Council of the European Union, 2020a). The following month, in response to the brutal methods used by the Belarusian authorities, including constantly repeated repression such as the brutal beating and death of the oppositionist Bondarenko, the EU Council decided to impose sanctions on another 36 people and entities (Council of the European Union, 2020b). As Fedorowicz (2020b) rightly points out, the authorities' brutal methods of pacifying peaceful protest in Belarus resulted in a thorough re-evaluation of Poland's policy towards its eastern neighbour, as well as the adoption of two types of actions: on the one hand actions aimed at the widest possible internationalization of the political cri-

sis in Belarus, and on the other, actions consisting in developing many aid solutions for people injured in the protests and forced to emigrate (Fedorowicz, 2020b). The Polish government also developed a special aid package, 'Solidarity with Belarus', for which PLN 50 million was allocated in the first year alone (Fedorowicz, 2020b).

The next year did not bring any improvement in the relations between Poland, the EU and Belarus; in this context the key factor was the forced landing in Minsk of a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius on 23 May 2021, resulting in the detention of the Belarusian oppositionist Pratasiewicz and his partners. As a result, on 4 June 2021 the EU Council decided to tighten sanctions against Belarus by banning all Belarusian carriers from flying through EU airspace and accessing EU airports (Council of the European Union, 2021a); then on 21 June it decided to impose another package of sanctions against another 78 persons and eight entities (Council of the European Union, 2021b). The EU sanctions system thus covered a total of 166 people and eight entities from Belarus; these sanctions were of course recognized by Poland as an EU member. Poland was even one of the initiators and co-creators of these sanctions.

4. Relations in the era of hybrid war: Crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border

The imposition of subsequent packages of sanctions by the EU was met with a sharp and unprecedented reaction from the Lukashenko regime, which in mid-2021 launched channels for the transfer of migrants to the territory of the EU through Belarus's borders with Lithuania, Poland and Latvia, thus leading to a crisis on the border between Belarus and the EU. As Wawrzusiszyn (2022) emphasizes, in order to bring migrants to the borders of Belarus with EU countries, the Lukashenko regime used 'Operation Sluice', developed in 2010–2011 by the heads of the KGB and a special unit of border troops, and the recruitment of volunteers took the form of a large-scale disinformation operation, consisting in convincing potential migrants about the ease of crossing the border with Poland, among others, and continuing their journey to Germany and other western EU countries (Karska & Oręziak, 2024, pp. 211–226; Karska et al., 2023, pp. 27, 40, 66 & 78; Kuzelewska & Piekutowska, 2023, pp. 39–55).

Already in the first days of August 2021, the Polish Border Guard detained 349 migrants from Iraq and Afghanistan who had illegally crossed the Polish–Belarusian border (Charlish, 2021). On 17 August the Polish Government Information Centre reported that since the beginning of that month, over 1.9 thousand people had tried to cross the Polish–Belarusian border, of which over 1.1 thousand were returned and 760 were sent to centres for foreigners. It should be noted that at the end of August, the Polish government publicly announced for the first time the strengthening of protection of the Polish–Belarusian border by starting the construction of an approxi-

mately 180 km-long (Polsatnews.pl, 2021a), and on 31 August it adopted a resolution to introduce a state of emergency in the zone located directly next to the border – including 115 towns in the Podlaskie voivodeship and 68 towns in the Lublin voivodeship – which entered into force by virtue of the regulation of the president of the Republic of Poland on 2 September 2021, initially for a period of 30 days (International Law Association, 2024, p. 10; Zdanowicz, 2023). Also in August, Morawiecki – then prime minister – confirmed plans to further seal the Polish–Belarusian border, announcing that the Polish government would not allow ‘waves of unauthorized persons to enter Polish territory’ and directly accusing the Belarusian authorities of escalating the conflict and conducting hybrid activities (TVN24, 2021a). At that time, an increase in unfavourable messages against Poland in the Belarusian media was also observed (Gov.pl, n.d.).

In autumn 2021, the Sejm decided to extend the state of emergency in Poland (Onet.pl, 2021). Shortly after, the Polish authorities sent a note to the Belarusian authorities in connection with the migration crisis, and in mid-October an increase in the number of soldiers stationed on the border with Belarus was announced. November 2021 turned out to be particularly difficult: on 8 November Belarusian services sent the largest group of migrants so far to the Polish–Belarusian border, near the crossing in Kuźnica. The migrants were directed to the forest, where they set up camp. Due to this situation, the Polish government convened a crisis headquarters (Polsatnews.pl, 2021b), and soldiers of two light infantry battalions from the 1st Podlasie Territorial Defence Brigade from Białystok and Hajnówka were put on alert (Polsatnews.pl, 2021c). On the same day, there was an attempt by migrants to forcefully and illegally cross the border; the security measures erected at the border were destroyed and there were attacks on Border Guard officers, police officers and soldiers. The migrants were equipped with tools to help them destroy the border fences (Kacprzak & Zawadka, 2021). During the incidents on the border in the Kuźnica area, there were 12,000 soldiers, 8,000 Border Guard officers and 1,000 policemen. The then spokesman for the Minister-Coordinator of Secret Services, Żaryn, said that the estimated number of migrants brought to the border area was approximately 4,000 (Polsatnews.pl, 2021d). The situation on the border was so tense and unpredictable that on 15 November, the then prime minister, Morawiecki, stated that, together with the prime ministers of Lithuania and Latvia, he was considering using Art. 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty in connection with the escalation of tension on sections of their borders with Belarus (TVN24, 2021b). Between August 2021 and 2022, the Polish Border Guard prevented almost 40,000 people who illegally tried to enter the territory of Poland from Belarus from crossing the border (Klyta, 2024). The illegal immigrants mainly came from Iraq, Afghanistan and other countries in the Middle East and Africa.

Starting in the autumn of 2021, western countries publicly disclosed information from intelligence sources about the armed, full-scale aggression against Ukraine planned by the Russian Federation. At the turn of January and February 2022 on the

territory of Belarus, the joint Russian and Belarusian armies carried out extraordinary exercises, 'Allied Resolve 2022', in which approximately 60,000–80,000 soldiers took part (Wilk, 2022). On 24 February, an open armed conflict of the nature of a regular war broke out when the Russian Federation launched a large-scale invasion of independent Ukraine (Karska & Dąbrowski, 2024). From the very beginning, Belarus actively sided with the Russian Federation, supporting it politically and militarily, thus becoming a co-aggressor in this war which continues to this day. This triggered further sanctions from the EU and worsened the already very bad relations between Poland and Belarus. Additional tensions were caused by the devastation of Polish memorial sites in Belarus in 2022; among others, the Home Army monument in Stryjówka (Kozłowski, 2022), cemeteries in Mikuliszki and Surkonty, graves and commemorations of the Home Army in Bogdany, Bobrowicze, Jodkiewicz, Wołkowysk, Dyndyliszki, Kaczyce, Iwie, Piaskowce, Osmianie and Plebaniszki, and the Katyn monument at the military cemetery in Grodno were destroyed. In turn, the crisis on the Polish–Belarusian border decreased in 2022 compared to the previous year. According to the Polish Border Guard, in 2022 there were 15,600 attempts to illegally enter the territory of Poland (Klyta, 2024).

The year 2023 and the first half of 2024 have not brought any changes in the relations between Poland and Belarus. The crisis on the border that began in the second half of 2021 still seems to have no end. Compared to the previous year, in 2023 the crisis intensified again: the border with Poland was illegally crossed about 26,000 times (Klyta, 2024). However, from 1 January 2024 to 23 June 2024, the Podlaski Branch of the Polish Border Guard recorded nearly 20,000 attempts to illegally cross the border. Due to the still difficult situation on the border between Poland and Belarus, on 13 June 2024, a regulation of the Minister of Internal Affairs and Administration, on the introduction of a temporary ban on staying in a specific area in the border zone adjacent to the state border with Belarus, entered into force. However, there are more and more reports in the media about the possible complete closure of border crossings with Belarus (Chołodowski, 2024).

Conclusions

Mutual relations and cooperation between Poland and Belarus, although extremely limited, did once exist. After the rigged presidential elections of August 2020, the intimidation and brutal repression of peaceful protesters, opposition members and journalists, Belarus's involvement in Russian aggression against Ukraine and the start of a hybrid war by the Belarusian regime on the border with Poland, the future of mutual relations is now under serious threat.

Today's Belarus is definitely closer to Moscow than to Warsaw, and Poland's long-term goal should undoubtedly be a democratic, free and independent Belarus.

Poland will not be safe as long as its neighbours Russia and Belarus are unable to democratically decide on their system and direction of development. If the Belarusian authorities continue to repress their citizens, including representatives of the Polish minority, and provoke a hybrid war, Poland will consistently strive to impose further EU sanctions and apply the full range of measures at Poland's disposal.

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