

Relations of Poland and the Baltic States with Belarus: Geopolitical Ambitions, Historical Symbolism and Dynamics of Migration¹

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Abstract: *The current paper analyses the background of the relationship of the Baltic States and Poland with Belarus. The Baltic states together with Poland were advocating a decided foreign policy towards the political system of Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the last fifteen years, which applied through the financial support of political opposition, the support of NGO-s and media outlets, attraction of Belarusian students and qualified workforce and firm political actions. This policy culminated during the latest political crisis, following the presidential elections of August 2020. This paper analyses the historic roots behind the respected countries' relationship, important domestic factors influencing the decision making, dynamics of migration in the recent years, the geopolitical ambitions of Poland and the strategic factors, perceiving Belarus a security threat for the region.*

Keywords: *Belarus, Baltic states, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland, Russia, Central Europe, Lukashenka*

Introduction

When the 9th August 2020 presidential elections in Belarus ended with mass protests across the whole country and a violent law enforcement response, Poland and Lithuania were among the first countries to react. Belarus's closest

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neighbours condemned the use of force against the protesters and did not accept the results of the elections, which, according to official data, were won by the sitting president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka, who has led the country since 1994. The response of Poland, Lithuania, and the rest of the Baltic countries was predictable: in recent decades, they have been the main bastions for the Belarusian opposition, supporting democratic institutions in the country and voicing the need for systemic changes in Belarus in the international arena. These four states also criticized the slow response of Brussels to the situation, demanding tough actions against Lukashenka's rule.

The goal of this essay is to explore the relations between Poland and the Baltic states and Belarus. While the officially expressed intentions of the above-mentioned countries in their relations to Belarus refer to European values and the support of democracy, it has been argued that there are other, even more important factors in the background. As this essay will argue, the main reasons underlying Poland and the Baltic states' support for the Belarusian opposition against the government of Lukashenka lie in a combination of strategic factors, geopolitical ambitions, deep historical roots, and symbolism, as well as domestic political factors.

The second chapter of this article briefly explores the common historical past of the region, going back to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as well as the attitudes toward the common past among the population of the region. The next section explores the domestic implications of the Belarusian situation, as well as historical symbolism. The fourth chapter identifies the strategic and security background of these relations, including the geopolitical ambitions of Poland and the Baltic states, and the institutionalized tools used by these countries in regards to Belarus. The fifth part explores the main trends in migration from Belarus to neighbouring EU states in recent years, whether in terms of work-related or political emigration. The introduction of the so-called *Karta Polaka* in 2009 has definitely accelerated the migration flows, while the events following the presidential elections of 2020 led to a shift in the composition of the migration flows, from individuals to small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Finally, the last two chapters describe the political actions of Poland and the Baltic states following the 2020 elections, and their economic consequences in the first half of 2021.

In order to identify the main possible factors in relations between Poland, the Baltic states, and Belarus, the author employs descriptive analysis, while for some of the chapters (Belarusian migration; brain drain; economic consequences) he relies on quantitative analyses. For these quantitative analyses, the main sources of data were the National Statistics Committee of Belarus (Belstat), related divisions of United Nations (UN) statistics, and data from the World Bank. Related literature was used for the background information, while for

the chapters describing recent events the author used sources from Belarusian, Polish, and international media, and from local think tanks.

Historical roots

In order to understand the relationship of the Baltic states and Poland with Belarus, we have to look at the historical roots of the region. The whole territory of the modern Belarus was once part of Grand Duchy of Lithuania at its peak in the 15th century, and while the name of the state came from its founding nation, after the integration of Slavic territories (such as the Principality of Polotsk) number of Belarusians exceeded the Lithuanian nation by far. By the 14th century, the share of ethnic Lithuanians was just 10–14 % of the overall population (Wiemer 2003: 109). In reality, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was more an alliance between Balts and Slavs, in which the Slavs and their language dominated (Astapenia 2018). In 1569 the Grand Duchy of Lithuania united with Poland, creating the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and the Poles became the majority population of the new union state. Over five hundred years of statehood suddenly came to an end in 1795, when Russia, Austria, and the Kingdom of Prussia divided its territory between themselves.

At the same time, it is also important to note that while in Lithuania and Poland these centuries of common history with Belarus are mostly described as the rule of Poles and Lithuanians, in Belarus and Ukraine the emphasis is on the allied, coequal aspect of their common history.

Later, in the nineteenth century, the romantic references to the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania inspired both Lithuanian and Belarusian national revival movements, stemming from the same historical roots. The national historical symbols of Lithuania, Latvia, Poland, and Belarus have very much in common: the white-red-white flag, used now mainly by the Belarusian opposition, resembles the Latvian red-white-red and the Polish white-red flag, while the national coat of arms, 'Pahonia', is a variant of the historical coat of arms of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, used also by Lithuania. Based on these historical roots, the populations of the Baltic states and Poland show a common sympathy towards the people living in Belarus, which can be measured using various opinion polls.

There is also a significant Polish minority living in Belarus – nearly three hundred thousand ethnic Poles, i.e. three per cent of the population of Belarus, while there are around one hundred thousand Belarusians living in Poland and Lithuania (see Chart 2).

The attitudes towards the common Polish-Lithuanian-Belarusian historical past have recently overshadowed the common history of Belarus and Russia, for the first time since surveys began. According to a recent opinion poll conducted at the beginning of 2021 among the Belarusian population by the Polish Centre

for Eastern Studies (OSW), 40 % of the respondents believe that Belarus should rely on the historical heritage associated with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, rather than on the heritage of the Soviet Union (28 %).²

The same poll showed a positive view of Belarusians regarding Polish and Lithuanian nationalities. The two came on the fourth and fifth place after Russians (96.2 % of the respondents expressed their positive view), Ukraine (85.5 %) and Germans (85.3 %). Polish nationality received 82.9 % of positive responds, while Lithuanians 76.2 %.³ The positive view on the individual countries is lower compared to the nations, and it especially true for Ukraine as a state (70.5 % of positive responses compared to 85.5 %).

Domestic factors and historical symbolism

Because of the above mentioned historical past the situation in Belarus has pronounced domestic political dimension: the actions of the local decision-makers are closely monitored by their voters. On the one hand, these countries have a long common history with Belarus, dating back to the time of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; on the other, Belarus is a close neighbour and an important trading partner.

Therefore, the symbolism of the situation as regards human rights and democracy is often emphasized by leaders in Poland and the Baltic states: according to the analogies, Belarusian people are fighting for their rights and democratic freedom – just like in the 1980s and the early 1990s, when Poland and the Baltic states gained their independence from the Soviet Union.

This symbolism was made apparent during the anniversary of the ‘Baltic way’, on 23 August 2020. On this day in 1989, 25 per cent of the population of the Baltic states – nearly two million people – joined hands, connecting the three Soviet republics in a 670-kilometre-long chain. The goal of the peaceful demonstration was to show to the world that the people of the Baltic states desperately wanted freedom and sovereignty. In 2020, on the 31st anniversary of the event, more than fifty thousand people connected the Lithuanian capital, Vilnius, to the Belarusian border, showing their solidarity with the Belarusian protesters.⁴ The Lithuanian president, Gitanas Nauseda also joined the demonstration. For the Baltic states and Poland, the protests which started in Belarus in August 2020 after the presumably rigged presidential elections symbolized

2 ‘Belarusians about Poland, Russia and themselves’. Public opinion poll. Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 29 January 2021, available at: <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2021-01-29/bialorusini-o-polsce-rosji-i-sobie> (21 March 2021).

3 Ibid.

4 ‘Baltic nations form human chains in support of Belarus protests.’ Deutsche Welle, 23 August 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/baltic-nations-form-human-chains-in-support-of-belarus-protests/a-54667005> (22 March 2021).

the rebirth of Belarus as a European nation, reminding them of the events in their own countries thirty years ago.

In an August article, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki also made symbolic comparisons between the events in Poland forty years ago, and the suppression of freedom in a European country. *“We must make solidarity a project for the whole of Europe, and that is why solidarity is our proposal for the coming decades of development.”* – written Morawiecki in the article published by different European media outlets (Morawiecki 2020).

Since both the population of Poland and those of the Baltic states have vivid memories of their Soviet past and their independence movements, the only possible political standpoint is to firmly oppose the current Belarusian government – viewed as a successor of the previous Soviet system.

Geopolitical ambitions and strategic factors

Poland and Lithuania have clear geopolitical ambitions in the region. From their perspective, bringing Eastern European countries under the umbrella of the Euro-Atlantic system will result in several benefits. Firstly, it is a question of security, since it would result in the creation of a safe zone along the borders. Securing the eastern periphery of the European Union is one of the primary security policy goals of these countries. Secondly, there are important economic reasons. The Baltic states and Poland have busy seaports, and good relationships with democratic, open market economies would further boost their trade flows. Moreover, in perspective, Eastern Europe is a huge market to which their goods can be exported. Poland is also experiencing a labour shortage at present, and is therefore interested in attracting a well-qualified workforce from Belarus and Ukraine. And third, potential Eastern European allies would give them leverage in the EU. With the process of the EU enlargement, the centre of gravity of the union would move to Central Europe, increasing the importance and the political weight of the Visegrád Group and the Baltic states.

With the above-mentioned aims in mind, several geopolitical projects have been launched in the region in recent years:

- **The Eastern Partnership** is an ambitious project initiated by Poland in 2009, aimed at building a “common area of shared democracy, prosperity, stability, and increased cooperation”.⁵ Six countries were involved in the initiative, including Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine.
- **The Three Seas Initiative.** Supported mainly by Poland (and the United States), this project aims to connect a bloc of countries situated between

5 European External Action Service, available at: https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/340/europe-and-central-asia_en (21 March 2021).

Western Europe and the Russian sphere of interest. In the current form it is a forum of twelve countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) along a corridor between the Baltic sea, the Black sea and the Adriatic Sea. The idea goes back a hundred years, and was reinitiated by Warsaw after 2015.

- **The Lublin triangle** is the newest cooperation format in the region, created on 28 July 2020 during a meeting of the ministers of foreign affairs of Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine in Lublin. The goal is to coordinate the three states' activities within international organizations, support the Euro-Atlantic integration of Ukraine, and counter potential Russian aggression (Bornio 2020).

As summarized by Laurynas Kasčiūnas, a member of Lithuania's Seimas in 2019: *"We have two approaches to Belarus in Lithuania. First, we understand that this is an authoritarian regime, but we need to open the doors to the West so that Lukashenka balances between West and East. Second, Lukashenka is already in the East, the only question is the length of the chain of his dependence on the Kremlin. Minsk has been trading its sovereignty for 25 years and will continue to bargain"* (Kruglova 2021).

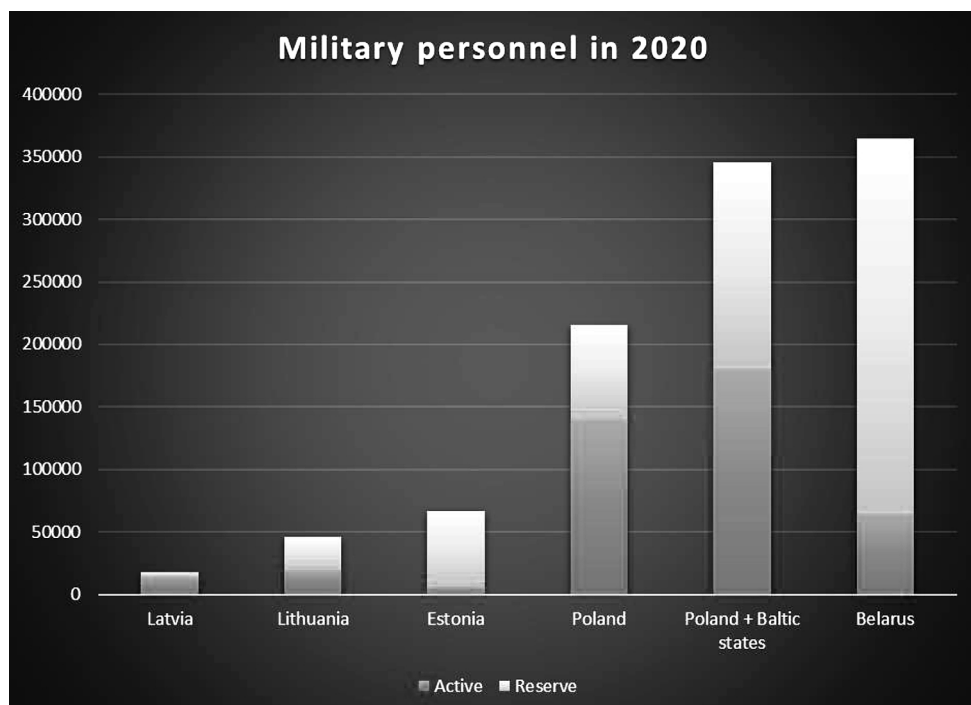
Strategic factors

Since the integration of Belarus into Russia's various institutions, the country is viewed by its Western neighbours as a potential threat. Belarus is now perceived as Russia's closest ally – economically, politically, and in terms of military cooperation. Minsk is a member of the Russian military organization, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a member of the Russian-Belarusian Union State, and part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a block consisting of five countries, which is also led by Russia. The aim is to counter Russian influence and potential Russian aggression, and both Poland and Lithuania will do everything to support the opponents of Lukashenka and help the democratic transition of Belarus.

The Belarusian Army is equipped with modern Russian arms. Belarus has a conscription military service: together with its reserves, its personnel exceeds 360,000 soldiers – more than Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Poland has altogether. The military cooperation between Russia and Belarus is regulated in both the Union State Treaty and the CSTO treaty. In case of military intervention, or a military threat from a foreign country, they are obliged to help each other.

In August 2020, Belarus accused Poland of destabilizing the situation in the country with the aim of occupying its Hrodna region in the northwest. This is the region with the densest Polish minority – over two hundred thousand eth-

Chart 1: Military personnel of Belarus, Poland and the Baltic states.



Source: open source data provided by the respected countries' defense ministries.

nic Poles live there. The conflict continued to escalate through August 2020, and Minsk started a large-scale military exercise near the border of Lithuania and Poland. The state television broadcast intimidating news about a possible NATO intervention, potential air strikes, and the partitioning of the country.

Minsk accused the West of waging a hybrid warfare against Belarus by supporting the opponents of the government, mobilizing ethnic minorities, acting in the information space, and concentrating NATO forces along the borders. This was also a message to Moscow: Belarus is in danger, it is counting on Russia's help, and Lukashenka is the only one able to prevent the country falling into the hands of the West. Poland denied the accusations of military actions and interference in the internal politics of Belarus, and asked for a non-violent resolution of the situation and a peaceful dialogue with the opposition. Jens Stoltenberg, secretary general of NATO declared that there was no reinforcement of the organization's military forces in the region, and Lukashenka's accusations of NATO were but an excuse to strike against the opponents of his regime.⁶

⁶ 'President Lukashenko claims NATO has aggressive plans against Belarus'. EuroNews, 29 August 2020, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2020/08/29/president-lukashenko-claims-nato-has-aggressive-plans-against-belarus> (21 March 2021).

For the region, the situation in Belarus is also extremely important because of the country's geographical position. There is a narrow, 65-kilometre-long corridor connecting Poland to Lithuania and the rest of the Baltic states, the so-called Suwalki Gap. This is a tough-to-defend, flat piece of land. On the other two sides are situated the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus. In case of hostile strategic manoeuvres, this corridor could easily be occupied, and the Baltic states would thus be cut off from NATO and the rest of the European Union.

Map 1: The Suwalki gap.



Source: 'Scenarios for Central and Eastern Europe in a Russia-NATO conflict'. Geopolitical Intelligence Services (GIS), 19 April 2017. Available at: <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/scenarios-for-central-and-eastern-europe-in-a-russia-nato-conflict,defense,2193,report.html> (22 March 2021).

Institutionalized tools – NGOs and political organizations

There are several tools in the arsenal of Poland and the Baltic states. Vilnius is a home for numerous Belarusian institutions, NGOs and opposition media outlets, which can be explained by historical reasons and its geographic proximity: the Lithuanian capital is just 170 kilometres from Minsk. The Belarusian European Humanities University, which was banned from the country by the authorities in 2004, is also operating from Vilnius, attracting many Belarusian students. Nowadays the Lithuanian capital is one of the most important meeting places for the Belarusian opposition, and the residence of the opponents of Alyaksandr Lukashenka.

Warsaw is the other important bastion of the opponents of Lukashenka. Since 2006 Poland has been offering governmental scholarships to Belarusian students, who cannot study at home for political reasons (Kastuś Kalinoŭski

scholarship). Several Belarusian media outlets are operating from Poland and Lithuania: Nexta, Belsat, Nasha Niva, Charter-97, Evroradio. After the start of the mass protests in August 2020, the coordination of the opposition and the distribution of the news from the streets was done by these media outlets, either from Warsaw or Vilnius. The largest political media outlet, Nexta had around 500,000 subscribers in Telegram in the end of July. By the end of August its auditory has grown to 2.1 million – considerable numbers for a country of 9.5 million population.

Organizations acting in opposition to Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime can be divided into two groups: donors, who provide grants and other support to NGOs and initiatives across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet states, and organizations working directly for political transformation in Belarus. The international donor organizations have offices across Eastern Europe. Some of them used to operate in Belarus, but were banned from the country, like NDI and IRI, which moved to Vilnius after being expelled. Most local organizations, created mostly by the Belarusian nationals, are in majority operated from Warsaw or Vilnius, while some of their colleagues are located in Belarus. See the Annex for a detailed list of NGOs and political organizations related to Belarus.

Belarusian migration to Poland and the Baltic states

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, statistics indicated that 1.76 million Belarusians lived abroad.⁷ This was more due to the heritage of the Soviet Union than the deliberate travel preferences of the population. The number of Belarusians living abroad in the last three decades gradually decreased, and was only 1.48 million by 2019.⁸ However, important changes took place during this time in the dynamics of the migration flows from the country. The number of Belarusians living in Russia, Ukraine, and Poland (the top three destinations) decreased steadily until a turning point around 2010. After that, the number of Belarusian emigrants started to increase again, mainly as an effect of the international economic crisis of 2008–2009.

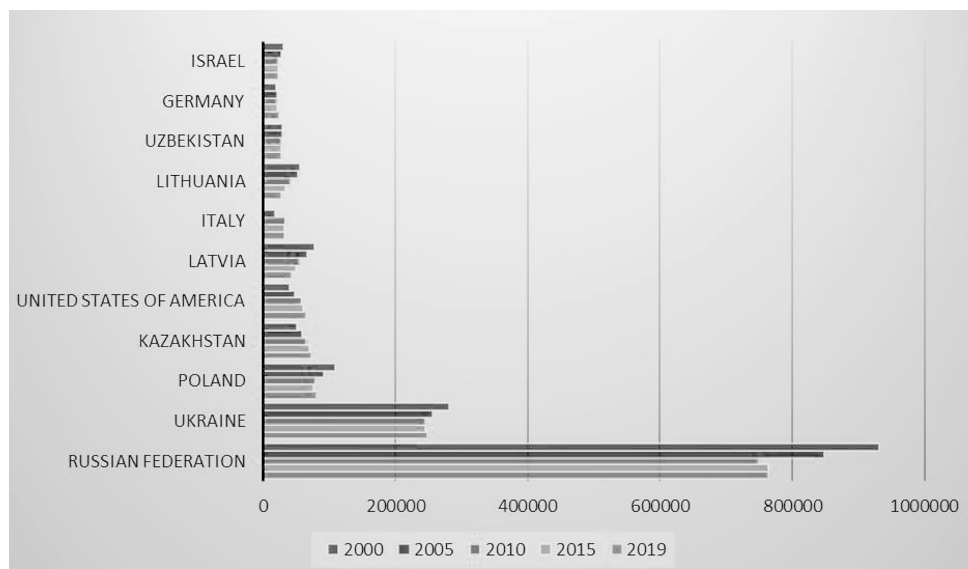
The number of the Belarusians living in the Baltic states has also significantly dropped in the last decades. Back in 2000, Latvia and Lithuania were among the top five destinations, while in 2019 Latvia was the sixth country by the number of Belarusians living there (a 45% drop from 77,000 people in 2000 to 43 000 in 2019), and Lithuania was the eighth on the list.⁹ At the same time migration

7 International migrant stock 2019. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp> (21 March 2021).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

Chart 2: Total migrant stock from Belarus between 2000 and 2019 in the top ten most frequent countries by 2019 data



Source: International migrant stock 2019. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, United Nations. Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/data/estimates2/estimates19.asp> (21 March 2021).

flows to Kazakhstan, the United States, the Czech Republic, Italy, Sweden, the United Kingdom and France have drastically increased. Italy had the highest, nineteenfold increase in twenty years in the number of Belarusians living there (from 1,674 in 2000 to 31,526 in 2019).

Recently, the dynamics of migration flows are changing in favour of Poland and the Baltic states, and this is the result of their well-advised migration policy. The global economic crisis of 2008–2009 and the political repressions following the 2010 presidential elections increased the interest of Belarusians in their Western neighbours. The Russian occupation of Crimea in 2014 and Western European sanctions have further worsened the economic and working conditions in Russia (and as a consequence also in Belarus). Poland and the Baltic states implemented specific policies in response, attracting young working-age people and students from Belarus through a simplified visa regime, abolishing the obligation for seasonal workers to obtain work permits, financial support, and other incentives (Daneyko 2018). Up until 2020 the most frequent sectors for the Belarusian work force were construction, infrastructure and agriculture. In recent years, more Belarusians have worked in Poland than in Russia—at least according to Google search results.¹⁰

¹⁰ Based on the data from Google Trends, <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=by> (22 March 2021).

Chart 3: Google search comparison in the last five years between 2016–2021. The blue line shows search by ‘work in Poland’, while the red line indicates ‘work in Russia’

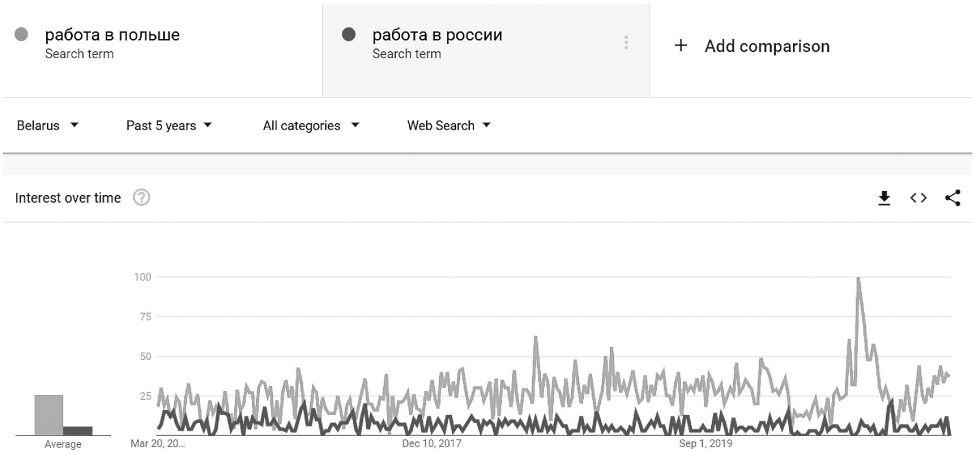
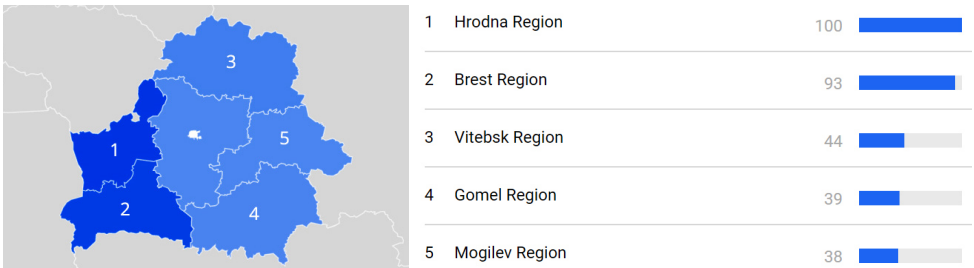


Chart 4: It can also be observed that an interest in working in Poland is characteristic mainly of the Western regions of Belarus.



Source: Google Trends, <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=by> (22 March 2021).

Karta Polaka

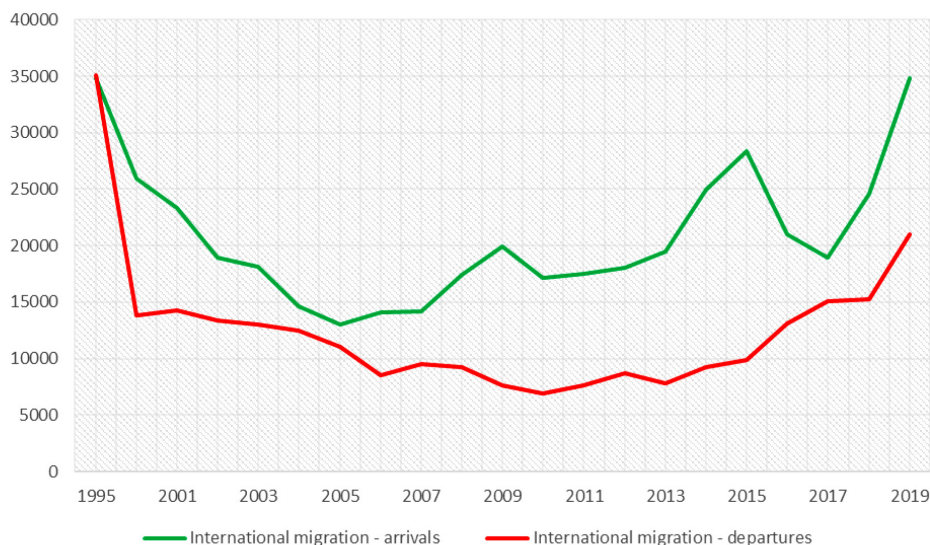
The so-called *Karta Polaka*, or Pole’s card was introduced back in 2009, and proved to be a successful geopolitical tool of Poland to influence people in the Eastern-Europe with Polish origins. It was a document stating the ‘Polish ancestry’ of individuals who could not obtain dual citizenship in their own country. Officially, it was created for ethnic Polish minorities, but it became available for anybody who had vague Polish roots. After its introduction, several thousand people declared their Polish identity, while Belarus – and even some of the Baltic

states – protested against this practice. During the last decade – and especially after the 2010 elections – claiming Polish origin became for Belarusians the easiest way to travel to the European Union.

The holders of the *Karta Polaka* can travel freely to Poland, they do not need a work permit, are eligible for free education and even some other benefits, like 37 % discount on public transport in Poland. Some 43 % of the cardholders are Belarusians (their number exceeds 100,000 thousand people), while altogether with Ukraine the share of the two countries' residents owning Pole's card reached 91,4 % (Kostetskiy 2020).

After several years, Belarus reacted to the introduction of the Pole's card. In 2011, the Belarusian Constitutional Court stated that it was a violation of international norms and law, and in 2012, Minsk adopted a new law forbidding the country's administrative staff to apply for the card (Kostetskiy 2020). However, after the normalization of the relationship with Poland in 2014, and Alyaksandr Lukashenka's shuttlecock policy vis-à-vis the West, no more recriminations were directed against the Pole's card.

Chart 5: Migration in and out of Belarus between 1995 and 2019.



Source: Statistics on migration. National Statistics Committee of Republic of Belarus. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/naselenie-i-migratsiya/migratsiya/> (20 March 2021).

According to the latest data of the National Statistics Committee of Belarus, Belstat, in 2018 Poland was the fourth most popular migration destination for Belarusians with 765 emigrants, coming after Russia (6,732), Ukraine (1,411) and Turkmenistan (1,118). Among the Baltic states, Lithuania was on

the ninth place with 338 emigrants leaving for the country as per the official statistics.¹¹

However, it is important to note that international statistics give numbers by far higher than those of the Belarusian National Statistics Committee. The Russian Ministry of Interior registered 134,690 Belarusians, who came to work in 2018, while the Polish administration of foreigners reported 3,900 Belarusians, receiving permanent residence in the country (Rybchinskaya 2020).

Brain drain policy after August 2020

The migration flows have significantly increased since the presidential elections of August 2020. According to the data of the Belarusian Ministry of the Interior, in the two months until October more than ten thousand people left Belarus for Poland, and nearly five hundred for Lithuania or Latvia.¹² In the beginning the migration was mainly of a political nature – political leaders and activists fleeing the country in fear of repressions, then students and teachers, and others who opposed Alyaksandr Lukashenka's regime. Lithuania and Poland facilitated entry to their territory from the start. Despite the ongoing restrictions and closed borders due to the COVID-19 pandemic, political emigrants could enter these countries with simplified visa conditions, and students were offered scholarships at Lithuanian and Polish universities (Hodasevich 2020).

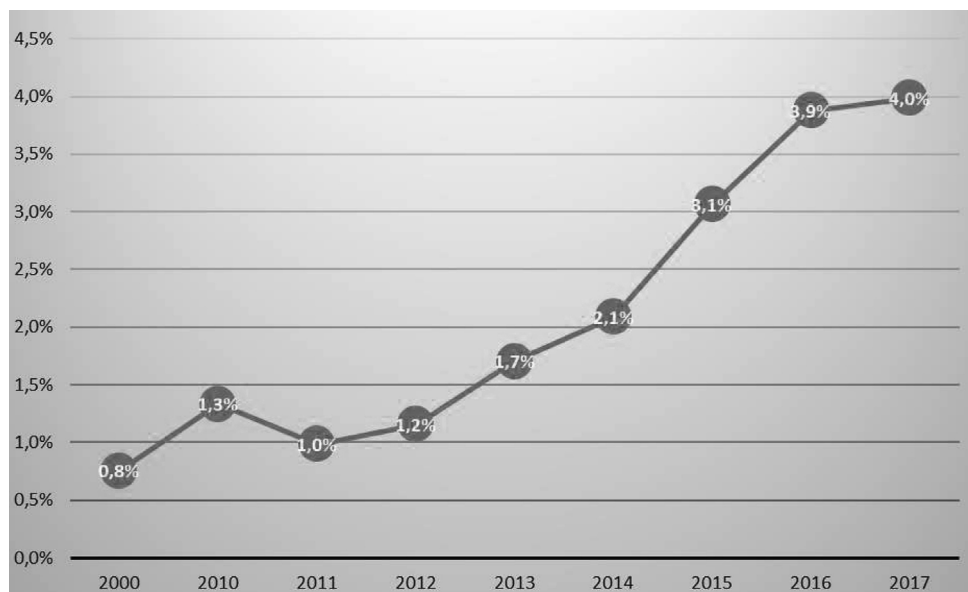
After several weeks of protests, which affected different spheres of business life, Poland and Lithuania developed new policies to attract Belarusian specialists, private businesses, IT companies, and start-ups to their countries. At the end of September 2020, Poland announced a new programme, called 'Poland Business Harbour', offering financial help for start-ups, help with relocation and to find new office locations, and quick visa permits for families of the companies' employees (Vatnik 2020). Lithuania offered similar incentives: English-language services, administrative help, simplified visa regulations and financial support (Seputyte – Kudrytski 2021).

The information and communications technology (ICT) sector plays an ever-increasing role in Belarus. The country introduced special laws to boost its tech sector relatively early, in 2005, in order to attract new investments, to open large tech parks, and to support IT companies to operating in the country (Bendarzsevszkij 2020: 22). In 2016 Belarus attracted over 169 million USD in foreign investments (Radu 2019), and over the last years the share of the ICT

11 Statistics on migration. National Statistics Committee of Republic of Belarus. Available at: <https://www.belstat.gov.by/ofitsialnaya-statistika/solialnaya-sfera/naselenie-i-migratsiya/migratsiya/> (20 March 2021).

12 'Begun told about the Belarusians, who went to work in Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic countries' (Бегун рассказал о белорусах, выехавших на трудоустройство в Украину, Польшу и страны Балтии). BELTA News Agency, 21 October 2020, available at: <https://www.belta.by/society/view/begun-rasskazal-o-belorusah-vyehavshih-na-trudoustrojstvo-v-ukrainu-polshu-i-strany-baltii-411979-2020/> (20 March 2021).

Chart 6: ICT services export share of total export (%) in Belarus, 2000–2017.



Source: World Bank.

sector in total exports exceeded 4 %.¹³ World famous companies like EPAM, Viber, PandaDoc or World of Tanks started in Belarus.

Just four months after the beginning of the political crisis, at least forty IT companies moved almost 900 employees to Vilnius, Lithuania, while another thirty companies planned to do so, according to Bloomberg (Seputyte – Kudrytski 2021). According to Seputyte – Kudrytski (2021), Lithuania already has the fastest growing financial technology (fintech) sector in the European Union, and the arrival of experienced specialists and various IT companies is giving its economy a big boost.

Political actions

Following the events on the night of the presidential elections on 9th August 2020, the Polish Prime Minister, Mateusz Morawiecki, was the first high-ranking politician in the EU to publicly condemn the situation in Belarus. *“The authorities have used force against their citizens, who are demanding change in the country. We must support the Belarusian people in their quest for freedom”* – declared Morawiecki in a statement.¹⁴

¹³ Data from World Bank

¹⁴ ‘Poland calls for extraordinary EU summit following tainted Belarus election’. Euractiv, 10 August 2020, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/europe-s-east/news/poland-calls-for-extraordinary-eu-summit-following-tainted-belarus-election/> (22 March 2021).

The response of the Baltic countries quickly followed: Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia did not recognize the results, and called for new, free, and fair elections. The presidents of the three countries and Poland also decided to hold regular consultations on the situation in Belarus. Shortly after the first days of the protests, the four presidents appealed to the Belarusian authorities to stop the violence, release the arrested protesters, and start a peaceful dialogue with the opposition.¹⁵ A concrete action plan was also presented to Alyaksandr Lukashenka, proposing the creation of a 'round table' working on national reconciliation with the representatives of the authorities and those of the civil society. Five days after the elections, on 14th August, Morawiecki called for new elections.

One week after the elections and in reaction to the ongoing protests in the country, on 18th August, the Seimas of Lithuania interrupted its summer holidays to unanimously accept a resolution on Belarus (Epifanova 2020). The resolution did not recognize the election results or Alyaksandr Lukashenka as the legitimate president; it called for new elections and for a mediatory EU mission in Belarus. In the meantime, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the main opponent of Lukashenka in the 2020 elections, left the country to settle in Lithuania. On 20th August, Lithuanian Prime Minister Saulius Skvernelis invited Tsikhanouskaya to his office and publicly referred to her as 'the national leader of Belarus'.¹⁶

As mentioned in the previous sections, Lithuania has also opened its borders to anybody, seeking political asylum, and has created a special fund to support the victims of police violence (Karmazin 2020). Poland and also Ukraine followed Lithuania's example, and opened their borders to Belarusian political emigrants, despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

On the second week of the protests, the Baltic presidents tried to organize a meeting with Alyaksandr Lukashenka, but received a refusal.¹⁷ One week later the Baltic countries made a new try on a lower level, proposing a meeting between their prime ministers and ministers of foreign affairs, and their Belarusian counterparts.¹⁸ Minsk refused for the second time. Thus, the diplomatic attempts of the Baltic states to find a peaceful solution to the Belarusian situation failed.

15 'Four presidents call on Lukashenko to renounce violence' (Четыре президента призвали Лукашенко к отказу от насилия). RBC, 13 August 2020, available at: <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/13/08/2020/5f355c9e9a7947778e09ff45> (22 March 2021).

16 Personal Facebook profile of Saulius Skvernelis, available at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2048001001999905&id=814777171988967 (22 March 2021).

17 'Presidents of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia want to come to Belarus' (Президенты Литвы, Латвии и Эстонии хотят приехать в Белоруссию). EurAsia Daily, 20 August 2020, available at: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/08/20/prezidenty-litvy-latvii-i-estonii-hotyat-priehat-v-belorussiyu> (22 March 2021).

18 'Belarus denied entry to the prime ministers of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania'. (Белоруссия отказала во въезде премьерам Эстонии, Латвии и Литвы). EurAsia Daily, 27 August 2020, available at: <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2020/08/27/belorussiya-otkazala-vo-vezde-premeram-estonii-latvii-i-litvy> (22 March 2021).

On 26 August, Lithuania was the first country in the EU to present a list of sanctions against Belarusian officials connected with the current situation. The list contained 118 names: commanders of the Special Forces, the Ministry of the Interior, the State Security Committee (KGB), the presidential administration, the central election commission, etc.¹⁹ President Alyaksandr Lukashenka was also on Lithuania's list. Estonia quickly followed, adopting legal sanctions against Belarusian officials, 'in coordination with Lithuania and Latvia'.²⁰ Officials present on these lists were banned from entering the Baltic states, and if they had bank accounts in the EU, these were frozen. On 20 November, the Baltic sanction list was extended, increasing the number of named individuals to over 150 (Mischenko 2020).

Lukashenka accused the West of interfering in the internal affairs of Belarus, calling their actions 'diplomatic carnage' and information warfare against the country. In response to Lithuania's list of sanctions, he promised countersanctions, including the redirection of trade flows through Lithuania. These threats were fulfilled at the end of 2020, as discussed in the next chapter.

Lithuania and Poland preceded the EU in their response to the situation in Belarus. The two countries were several steps ahead of Brussels, followed by Latvia and Estonia. Linus Linkevicius, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, even criticized Brussels for its slowness, when 'immediate actions are needed'.²¹ The first round of EU sanctions against Belarus was adopted one month after the Baltic states, on 1 October 2020. Then a second round (19th November) and a third (17th December) followed, designating 88 individuals and 7 entities in total.²² Sanctions in sports also followed, including the removal of Belarus from the joint organization of the 2021 Ice Hockey World Championship. It was originally intended to be co-hosted by Belarus and Latvia, but after the events in Belarus, the International Ice Hockey Federation (IIHF) announced on 2th February that Latvia would be the sole host of the championship.

19 'Lithuanian Foreign Ministry proposed sanctions against 118 Belarusian officials' (МИД Литвы предложил санкции против 118 белорусских чиновников). *Evropeyskaya Pravda*, 26 August 2020, available at <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/08/26/7113611/> (22 March 2021).

20 'Estonia was the first to impose sanctions for events in Belarus' (Эстония первой ввела санкции за события в Белоруссии). *RBC*, 27 August 2020, available at <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/08/2020/5f4779209a7947db2b219d76> (22 March 2021).

21 'Lithuania asked EU to react quicker on the crisis in Belarus' (Литва призвала ЕС быстрее реагировать на кризис в Беларуси). *Evropeyskaya Pravda*, 27 August 2020, available at <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2020/08/27/7113657/> (22 March 2021).

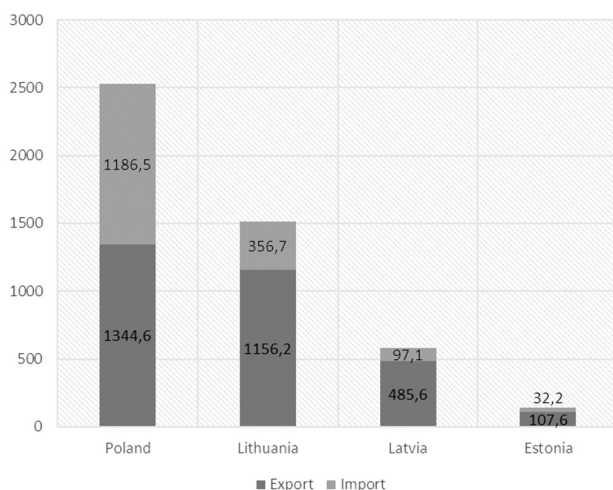
22 'Belarus: EU imposes third round of sanctions over ongoing repression'. European Council of the European union, 17 December 2020. available at: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/12/17/belarus-eu-imposes-third-round-of-sanctions-over-ongoing-repression/> (22 March 2021).

Economic consequences

Among the four countries, Lithuania had the most to lose: Belarus is one of its most important trading partners. Since Belarus is a land-locked country, it needs gateways to overseas markets. There are several options: Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Russia (though the last route is the longest). In recent decades, Belarus has deliberately diversified its trade flows through different ports in the region, making this an important political tool. The Baltic states were even competing with one another for Belarusian freight. When Lithuania called for sanctions after the 2010 presidential elections, Lukashenka threatened to redirect all trade flows towards the ports of Russia. In August 2020, he made the same threats again.

For Belarus, Poland is the fifth most important trading partner: in 2019, their trade turnover was 2,621 million USD,²³ while the trade with Lithuania reached 1,444 million USD in 2019 (eighth place for Belarus). For Lithuania Belarus is crucial for other reasons: Belarusian cargoes have accounted for more than 30 percent of cargoes transhipped at the Klaipeda seaport since 2014 (Melyantsou 2020). The port-related traffic generates nearly 18 % of the country's GDP. Latvia is in a very similar position: Belarusian products also account for 30% of overall cargo transit through the country (Melyantsou. 2020).

Chart 7: Belarusian trade with the Baltic states and Poland in 2018 (million USD)



Source: Melyantsou 2020.

²³ Export.by, <https://export.by/poland> (22 March 2021).

The Belarusian threats of 2010 to redirect transit flows from the Baltic sea ports did not have significant consequences ten years ago, but Minsk handled the situation differently this time. On 19 February 2021, a new agreement was signed with Russia on a 'take or pay' base, redirecting a big share of Baltic ports' transit to Russian seaports.²⁴ According to the agreement, Russian ports will handle in total 9.8 million tonnes of Belarusian petroleum products exports between 2021–2023, starting with 3.5 million tonnes in 2021.²⁵ On 5 March 2021, the first trains with Belarusian cargo departed for Russian ports, as per the agreement. For Belarus, the redirection of the transit flow from the Baltic seaports is not an economically rational decision: it was evidently dictated by political reasons. Lithuania and Latvia will lose traffic and revenues, Belarus will pay extra for the logistics, and Russia profits most from the conflict.

The current conflict between Poland, the Baltic states, and Belarus may lead to other serious consequences for the region: Belarus is an important transit hub for Chinese and Russian goods, which either enter the EU through the country, or make their way to distant destinations through the Baltic seaports. If Minsk limits these transit routes, and redirects them or makes the transit difficult, it may halt the economic growth of the region, and decrease or even halt foreign (especially Chinese) investments.

However, it is also important to note that Russian ports and infrastructure currently do not have the capacity to transport and handle the totality of Belarusian goods (Belarus currently exports around six million tonnes annually by sea (Manenok 2021), in addition to nearly 11 million tonnes of petroleum products per year²⁶), but it may as well change in the future.

Conclusions

The Baltic states and Poland took clear leadership within the EU in their response to the Belarusian political crisis, following the August 2020 presidential elections. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia were among the first countries to officially condemn the Belarusian authorities, calling for new elections and introducing political sanctions one month before the EU's joint response. However, this firm riposte to the political situation in Belarus is not new: the same criticism against Alyaksandr Lukashenka and his system had already been expressed during the presidential elections of 2001, 2006, and 2010 – all followed

24 'Russian ports are ready to accept any type of cargo from Belarus' (Российские порты готовы принимать любые грузы из Белоруссии). Prime, 19 February 2021, available at https://lprime.ru/state_regulation/20210219/833084068.html (19 March 2021).

25 Ibid.

26 'Russian ports are ready to accept any type of cargo from Belarus' (Российские порты готовы принимать любые грузы из Белоруссии). Prime, 19 February 2021, available at https://lprime.ru/state_regulation/20210219/833084068.html (19 March 2021).

by EU sanctions. However, after deteriorating for a few years, relations were normalized every time, and sanctions were lifted in the end. While Lukashenka was trying to manoeuvre between Russia and the EU, the decision-makers in Brussels and Washington were seeking to keep the country as far as possible from Russia, and made concessions and compromises. However, when the time came for the next elections in the country, marked again by repressions and violence, the whole process started from the beginning.

At the same time, the rising of the Belarusians as a nation against 'communist-like' oppression carries strong symbolical meaning for Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, and therefore will be further used by different political forces, appealing to their domestic voters. The region's common historical background is emphasized not only by the Baltic states and by Poland, but also – more and more often – by Belarusian opposition movements.

The geopolitical ambitions of Poland, which wants to be a regional power at the Eastern frontier of the EU, also require bringing Belarus into the European zone of influence through a democratic transition. There are important strategic and military interests at stake, according to which Belarus will be a threat to NATO and the Baltic states as long as it has strong ties with Russia. The membership of Minsk in the Russian military organization (CSTO) and other political and economic groups (mainly the Union State and the Eurasian Economic Union) could jeopardize the basic security conditions of the Baltic states.

There are also important economic factors at stake, as both Latvia and Lithuania are economically dependent on Belarusian freight passing through their ports. Further deterioration of the relationship with Belarus will result not only in the redirection of Belarusian trade flows to Russian ports (as has already happened from February 2021), but might also pose difficulties for Chinese and Russian goods being sent to Poland, the Baltic states, and Ukraine through Belarus.

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Annex

International donor organizations working on Belarusian direction:

- Eurasia Foundation (EF) – founded in 1992 after the collapse of the Soviet Union by Bill Frenzel, it is aimed to support the development of civil society, private enterprises and local democratic institutions.
- German Marshall Fund (GMF) – established during the cold war era in Germany, GMF now plays an active role in rising leaders and supporting civil society in the former soviet states.
- Open Society Foundations (OSF) – probably the biggest network and funding base for the Western democratic initiatives in Eastern Europe and CIS countries, founded by George Soros in 1979. The network has several local institutes and organizations aimed directly at Belarus or Ukraine.
- MacArthur Foundation (MAF) – one of the biggest private US foundations, operating since 1978 and supporting economic, political, ecologic, and etc. initiatives across the globe. In the post-soviet countries the financial support is mostly granted to security initiatives, economic development and for the operation of the free press.
- Freedom House – one of the oldest American organization devoted to the support of democracy around the world since 1941.
- Ford Foundation – founded in 1936, the foundation is supporting democratic values and social institutions across the world.
- National Endowment for Democracy (NED) – founded in 1983, its main goal remains the support and strengthening of the democratic institutions worldwide.
- The National Democratic Institute (NDI) – founded in 1983 after NED, it operates under its umbrella and has loose affiliations to the US Democratic Party.
- International Republican Institute (IRI) – also founded in 1983, its main goals are the support of freedom and democracy. It is affiliated to the US Republican Party.
- Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) – German political foundation supporting freedom, democracy and solidarity, established in 1925.
- Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) – German political party foundation associated to the CDU party and established in 1955.

- Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom (FNF) – German foundation supporting liberalism across the globe, established in 1958. Their local office is located in Ukraine, aimed at both Ukraine and Belarus.
- Heinrich Böll Stiftung – German political foundation associated with the German Green Party and established in 1997.
- Solidarity Fund (Fundacja Solidarności Międzynarodowej) – a foundation supporting foreign policy of Poland, and aimed at supporting independent media, democracy and human rights organizations. Between 2012–2017 they supported over 100 different projects in Belarus.
- Freedom and Democracy Foundation (Fundacja Wolność i Demokracja) – Polish organization established in 2006 with a goal of supporting democratic changes in the countries of former Soviet Union, and supporting Poles in the East.
- Polish aid (Polska pomoc) – Polish initiative started in 2011 and aimed at supporting Polish initiatives abroad. Among others, they are supporting Belarusian independent media outlets like Evroradio and BelSat.
- Batory Foundation – established in 1988 by George Soros in Poland with a mission to build an open, democratic society. According to some sources, this foundation was responsible for forming an overall EU policy towards Belarus in the beginning of 2000-ies.
- Grupa Zagranica – its not an organization, but more of a platform of Polish non-governmental organizations involved in international development cooperation, democracy support, humanitarian aid and global education. However, because of the coordination of the whole network, their role is important.
- Casimir Pulaski Foundation – a think-tank, specializing in foreign policy and international security with focus area in transatlantic relations, Russia and post-Soviet sphere. In 2017 they led a computer simulation on the consequences of a military conflict between Russia and NATO on the territory of Belarus.

Local organizations:

- Belarusian Institute for Strategic Studies (BISS) – founded in 2008, operating in Vilnius.
- Barys Zvozhskau Belarusian Human Rights House – founded in 2006, operating in Vilnius. Currently it unites 9 other organizations under its roof:
 - Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ)
 - Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) – one of the oldest human rights organisations in Belarus, founded in 1995. Famous Belarusian leaders like Vasil’ Bykau, Sviatlana Alexievich (Nobel prize in literature 2015), Ryhor Baradulin, Radzim Harecki, Henadz’ Buraukin are among its founders.
 - Human Rights Center Viasna – established in 1996, it is a national NGO with the central office in Minsk and regional organisations in the majority of Belarusian cities.
 - Human Rights House Foundation
 - Legal Initiative – founded in 1996, with the aim to build a rule of law state in Belarus and enhance the legal culture of the population.

- Belarusian PEN Center (founded in 1989)
- Francišak Skaryna Belarusian Language Society (founded in 1989)
- Lev Sapieha Foundation – one of the oldest public Belarusian organizations, established in 1992. The organisation aims to facilitate the process of establishment and development of democratic reforms in Belarus.
- Supolnasc Center
- Human Rights House Foundation (Norway)
- European Humanities University (EHU) – one of the most important centre of the Belarusian opposition, supported by most of the above-mentioned international donor organizations, operating in Vilnius.
- Fund for Belarus Democracy (FBD) – created by the GMF to directly support Belarusian citizen initiatives.
- European Endowment for Democracy (EED) – connected to the EU's Eastern Partnership project and created in 2013.
- For Freedom Movement – association of Belarusian democratic forces, established by Yury Gubarevich in 2006.
- Centre for European Transformation (CET) – established in 2010 and part of EuroBelarus consortium.
- CASE Belarus (Center for Social and Economic Research Belarus) – established in Warsaw in 2007.
- Institute of Political Studies “Political Sphere” – established in 2009 and operating in Vilnius.
- Belarusian Analytical Workshop (BAW) – established in Warsaw in 2012 by professor Andrey Vardomatsky and providing sociological and political surveys and research ever since.
- Belarus Security Blog – established in 2011 by a group of experts with a mission of analysing the field of national security of Belarus.
- Eurasian States in Transition Research Center (EAST Center) – established in 2016, the researchers are based in Vilnius, Warsaw and Belarus.
- Belarusian Center for European Studies – an organization bringing together researchers and experts, who stand for the European choice for Belarus.
- Ostrogorski Centre – a non-profit organisation dedicated to analysis and policy advocacy on problems which Belarus faces in its transition to market economy and the rule of law
- Center for New Ideas (CNI) – created in 2012 with a goal for political, modern transformation of Belarus.
- Belarusian House – operating in Warsaw, with the mission of coordination of different Belarusian oppositional forces.

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