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The Art of Responding Appropriately: The Dynamics of the Crisis in Polish– Belarusian Relations

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A long history of mistrust and confrontation

The current crisis in Polish-Belarusian relations has been developing over several years marked by escalating tensions and confrontations. The beginning of the deterioration of cooperation between the two countries was the watershed year of 2020, when the dramatic course of the presidential elections and the subsequent wave of brutal repression led to a breakdown of dialogue between Minsk and the West, including Poland. From that moment on, Warsaw, by responding unequivocally critically to human rights violations and lobbying for tougher sanctions, became the de facto enemy number one for the Belarusian regime. This was compounded by the historical context, in which the Sovietised Belarusian elites perceived almost every Polish activity in this part of Europe as an attempt to “expand and rebuild its pre-World War II sphere of influence”. The hostile, anti-Polish orientation of the Belarusian authorities is fully reflected in the country’s new historical policy, which was modified in line with the Russian narrative. Since 2021, Belarus has had a new public holiday: National Unity Day, celebrated on 17 September, which is the anniversary of the Red Army’s invasion of the eastern part of Poland in 1939. Every year, this anniversary is an opportunity for Belarusian propaganda to launch particularly intense campaigns of slander and accusations, built on the thesis that Poland throughout history - from before World War II, through the Polish underground during the German occupation, up to the current authorities in Warsaw - has sought to “destroy” the Belarusian nation.ⁱ This rhetoric is then followed by increased repression against the Polish minority and the Polish Catholic priests still serving in Belarus. The Polish language has also been increasingly suppressed, and acts of vandalism against Polish memorial sites and cemeteries, located mainly in the western part of the country, have been condoned or even encouraged.

In view of such a radical deterioration in relations with Belarus, which has led to an unprecedented crisis, Poland has taken an extremely cautious stance, based on a rationally justified sceptical assessment of the possibility of reaching an agreement with Lukashenka’s regime. Poland’s political elites deepened this conservative stance as a result of the migration crisis caused by Minsk and Moscow in the summer of 2021 (which has continued virtually uninterrupted to this day) and Belarus’s complicity in Russia’s full-scale aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. An additional factor contributing to the lack of trust was the unprecedented scale of disinformation that emerged in Belarus’s foreign and security policy after 2020 - disinformation that was spread according to the best Russian models. By declaring the need for talks with Warsaw without being prepared to meet its demands (e.g. resolving the migration crisis), the regime intends to blame Poland for rejecting its alleged desire to “normalise” the situation. Meanwhile, Minsk has not abandoned its confrontational policy even for a moment.ⁱⁱ

ZAPAD 2025: An interpretative challenge

In such a negative bilateral climate, unfavourable to any talks, the topic of this year’s Russian-Belarusian ZAPAD exercises, held regularly every few years on Belarusian and Russian territory, arose at the beginning of 2025. From the very beginning, there was real chaos in the narrative of the Belarusian authorities, as in February the Ministry of Defence authoritatively stated that the number of soldiers involved from both countries would exceed

13,000 - with this, in accordance with OSCE regulations, Minsk announced “full transparency” and its readiness to invite international observers. The atmosphere was heated by estimates presented by Ukrainian sources that the number of soldiers could reach as high as 150,000, and according to Kiev, these enormous forces would carry out strikes against Lithuania or Latvia. Then, at the end of May, Defence Minister General Viktor Khrenin unexpectedly announced a reduction of the announced number of troops by half and the relocation of the exercises themselves deeper into the country, i.e. further from Belarus’s western borders. He justified this decision with the need to “de-escalate the confrontational actions of the West”.ⁱⁱⁱ This sudden turn of events has put even experienced analysts in Poland in a difficult position, including the author of this article, as it has raised a fundamental question: is this another information game, or are the most modest ZAPAD exercises in the history of their organisation actually being prepared, and therefore not only will there be no expansion of hostilities, but there will also be no provocation, and the Belarusian side is actually interested in reducing tensions?

Another wave of disinformation

An adequate assessment of Minsk’s intentions towards its NATO neighbours, including Poland, is hampered by more than only the above-mentioned change in the narrative about the exercises. The picture was further obscured by another wave of Belarusian disinformation activities. In February this year, Valery Revienko, director of the international cooperation department at the Belarusian Ministry of Defence, approached the Polish authorities with a proposal to conduct bilateral inspections of fortifications and other military infrastructure within 80 kilometres of both sides of the border. The justification for this included standard rhetoric about de-escalation and the need for “normalisation”. Revienko used a propaganda tactic typical of the Belarusian regime, describing the offer made to Warsaw as a “test of the Polish side’s honesty and good intentions”.^{iv} In this context, one can only guess how the Belarusian Ministry of Defence commented on the negative reaction of the Polish military authorities.

The distrustful distance maintained by Warsaw did not discourage Minsk from pretending to make further attempts at dialogue. In July this year, the aforementioned representative of the Ministry of Defence made a public offer to Poland to “engage in bilateral talks on security in the region”. The justification for this included a whole list of accusations against Polish decision-makers regarding “confrontational policy and militarisation of the borderland”.^v This specific way of encouraging dialogue actually revealed Minsk’s real intentions - the move was only about obtaining another argument to use in the negative rhetoric of the Belarusian authorities, according to which Poland appeared almost as a potential aggressor threatening the stability of the region. This hypothesis has been confirmed by regular insinuations on the subject, expressed both by Lukashenka himself and by his subordinates (including, for example, General Alexander Wolfovich, Secretary of the Security Council of the Republic of Belarus, known for his anti-Western orientation). The regime’s message was clear and simple: Warsaw is an irresponsible warmonger, and peace between Russia, Belarus and NATO is only maintained thanks to the “responsible” attitude of Minsk.^{vi} At the same time, reports of a reduction in the scale of the ZAPAD 2025 exercises were confirmed - however, the main reason was not so much a real change in Belarusian security policy as a shortage of units in the Russian army that could be deployed to the exercises without weakening the front line in Ukraine, and perhaps a desire to portray Belarus as “peace-loving” in the eyes of the

world, which could be useful, for example, in the event of peace talks being organised in Minsk.

Warsaw's pragmatic scepticism

From Poland's point of view, assessments of Minsk's actions and proposals remain consistently sceptical. Both in recent months - and looking at the broader picture in recent years - nothing has happened that could serve as an impetus for building or rebuilding trust. For Warsaw, Minsk remains an unfriendly state, subordinate to Russian interests, which means continued confrontation with the West and aggression towards Ukraine. Hence, in August, the Polish press published information about the response of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to its Belarusian counterparts regarding the proposals for talks made in recent months. The excerpts from the diplomatic note disclosed by the media clearly show that Poland sees no grounds for negotiations with a country that "has repeatedly violated the rules of international relations, as evidenced, among other things, by its complicity in the aggression against Ukraine and the migration crisis that has continued since 2021".^{vii}

The sad but true confirmation of the correctness of this decision was the arrest on 4 September of Polish monk Grzegorz Gawel on charges of collecting data on Russian-Belarusian exercises. The absurdity of this accusation (the detainee, who was seriously frightened by the actions of the security services, did not even know the basics of the Russian language) and the attack on the clergyman caused undisguised irritation in Warsaw, which proved to be the trigger for an unprecedentedly radical retaliation in response to the brutal provocation by the regime. On 9 September, in connection with the "need to ensure the security of the Polish state and its citizens", Prime Minister Donald Tusk announced the decision to completely close the border from 11-12 September for at least the duration of the ZAPAD exercises, i.e. until 16 September.^{viii} What is more, just a few hours after the announcement of this decision, the most massive attack (or accidental violation) of Polish airspace by Russian drones took place, some of which flew in from Belarus. This incident only confirmed the legitimacy of the security measures taken.

Although border traffic has been restored on the night between 24th and 25th of September, this does not mean that bilateral relations have returned to normal. Minsk continues its disinformation games, coordinated on an ongoing basis with Moscow, while Warsaw, having learned from bitter experience, is keeping its distance from the "desire to hold a dialogue" messaging being put forward by its difficult neighbours to the east, just in case. In practice, this means that it is necessary to find adequate responses to Minsk's successive provocations while maintaining sanctions pressure on a regime which, apart from releasing small groups of political prisoners for short-term gains, shows no willingness to engage in real dialogue with the West.

ENDNOTES

- ⁱ K. Klysiński, *The anti-Western narrative in Belarus's historical policy becomes harsher*, Analyses OSW, 14.01.2024, The anti-Western narrative in Belarus's historical policy becomes harsher | OSW Centre for Eastern Studies
- ⁱⁱ P. Żochowski, *Mińsk pozoruje gotowość do rozmów z Warszawą*, Analyses OSW, 23.07.2024, Mińsk pozoruje gotowość do rozmów z Warszawą | OSW Centre for Eastern Studies
- ⁱⁱⁱ Хренин: Принято решение о переносе учений "Запад-2025" вглубь Беларуси, News.by, 28.05.25, Хренин: Принято решение о переносе учений "Запад-2025" вглубь Беларуси — News.by
- ^{iv} Минобороны: Беларусь готова к проведению взаимных военных инспекций с Польшей на глубину 80 км, News.by, 20.02.2025, <https://news.by/news/obshchestvo/minoborony-belarus-gotova-k-provedeniyu-vzaimnykh-voennykh-inspektsiy-s-polshey-na-glubinu-80-km?ysclid=mfdob9cpv4199185266>
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- ^{vii} A. Bartkiewicz, *Białoruś chciała wznowić dialog z Polską. Jest odpowiedź MSZ*, Rp.pl, 13.08.2025, <https://www.rp.pl/dyplomacja/art42849521-bialorus-chciala-wznowic-dialog-z-polska-jest-odpowiedz-msz>
- ^{viii} Poland to close Belarus border amid Russian Zapad military exercises, Notes from Poland, 09.09.25, Poland to close Belarus border amid Russian Zapad military exercises | Notes From Poland

