

## Poles

### Profile

The Polish community is concentrated in a strip of territory 120 kilometres wide and some 300 kilometres in length, stretching from the Polish border in the north-west along the border with the Baltic states. The 1999 census recorded 396,000 Poles. Only 13 per cent of the Poles speak Polish as their native language; 64 per cent claim Belarusian. Numbers of Poles in Belarus are debateable. Polish observers have tended to assume that all Roman Catholics in Belarus are ethnic Poles, even if the individuals concerned do not have a Polish identity.

### Historical context

The Polish presence in Belarus is the product of a centuries-long struggle for dominance of East-Central Europe between Poland and Russia. There has been a significant Polish influence in the area since the mid-sixteenth century. Under Soviet rule, pressure on the Polish community intensified. In the 1930s Polish autonomous areas in Belarus were dissolved. Between 1936 and 1938 thousands of Poles were deported.

During perestroika there was a revival of Polish culture. In 1990 the Belarusian Union of Poles was founded and there has been an increase in Polish language publications. The Roman Catholic Church has also revived with the assistance of Polish priests. A treaty of friendship between Poland and Belarus in June 1992 recognized the Polish-Belarus border as inviolable, rejected any mutual territorial claims and required that both sides fully observe minority rights.

The Polish minority is represented in Belarus by the Union of Poles in Belarus (UPB), which is thought to have an active membership of 10,000, making it the country's largest NGO. The UPB receives funding from Warsaw and publishes a newspaper, *Głos z nad Niemna* ('Voice from over the Niemen'). Since Lukashenka's accession to power, the Polish government has financed the construction of 16 Polish cultural centres in Belarus, and reportedly some 22,000 children in the country study Polish as a subject in school. However, a majority of Belarus's Poles are collective farm workers in Hrodna region and are seen by some analysts as loyal to the Lukashenka regime regardless of their ethnicity.

### Current issues

Relations between Belarus and Poland have deteriorated sharply since 2005 with significant consequences for Belarus's Polish minority. Poland's accession to the European Union and adoption of a pro-Western orientation, combined with pressure on the Belarusian government arising from the 'colour revolutions' elsewhere in post-Soviet countries, account for this situation.

In May 2005, a tit-for-tat series of expulsions of diplomatic staff began between the two countries, continuing through the summer. The expulsions allegedly began when Minsk expelled a member of the Polish embassy staff whom it accused of interfering with the activities of the Union of Poles in Belarus.

Poland then hinted that it might institute new visa regulations for Belarusian citizens seeking entry into Poland, while in July the Belarusian Foreign Ministry banned the activities of a Polish-based NGO, the Dialogue European Fund, in the country. The ban was justified by President Lukashenka on grounds that Poland was supporting 'pro-Western' forces in Belarus in advance of the 2006 presidential elections, and was followed by another expulsion of a Polish diplomat on 26 July, the third to be expelled in two months.

Also in May the Belarusian Ministry of Justice refused to recognize the UPB's new leadership elected at a congress in March. The Ministry claimed that voting irregularities had invalidated the vote and demanded a repeat election. The Belarusian authorities further detained three members of the UPB, accusing them of staging unauthorized meetings. This was followed by the storming of the UPB headquarters in the city of Hrodna and the detention for a few hours of newly elected UPB head Andzelika Borys; she was stripped of her post as the director of the UPB, and another three UPB leaders were jailed for 10 to 15 days for holding 'illegal meetings'. Poland recalled its ambassador to Belarus in response, and the UPB leadership accused the Belarusian authorities of seeking to replace its legitimate leaders with Lukashenka loyalists, namely former UPB head Tadeusz Kruczkowski, a figure seen as more pliant than Borys. In May and June the UPB was prevented from printing editions of its *Głos znad Niemna* newspaper, and some fake editions of the newspaper were allegedly distributed with the collaboration of Kruczkowski.

Further arrests and detentions of Polish community leaders followed in August. UPB deputy head Wiesław Kiewlak was sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment on 3 August, again in connection with an allegedly illegal meeting; the editor of a Polish newspaper was sentenced to 10 days in prison the next day for allegedly participating in an unauthorized meeting. Kruczkowski was also reinstalled as head of the UPB.

In 2006 Poland openly backed opposition candidates in Belarus's presidential election on 19 March and Polish ambassador Mariusz Maszkiewicz was imprisoned after participating in demonstrations protesting the result of the election. He was sentenced to 15 days' imprisonment and claimed he was beaten in detention.

In September 2006 demonstrations took place in Volokovysk protesting a government ban on the use of exchange teachers from Poland.