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The attitudes of Poles towards the Belarusian national aspirations in Minsk in 1917

Polacy wobec białoruskich aspiracji narodowych w Mińsku w 1917 roku

Палякі ў адносінах да беларускіх нацыянальных імкненняў ў Мінску ў 1917 годзе

The social and political aftermath of the February Revolution of 1917 in Russia gave the nations living within the Russian empire a hope for political empowerment. Independence aspirations were voiced not only by Poles, who had a tradition of statehood, but also by other nations living within the Republic of Both Nations, including Belarusians[1].

This situation left the elites of both nations facing new challenges since their political plans for the Belarusian lands were markedly different. This was evidenced, e.g., in the efforts made by Roman Dmowski, the leader of National Democracy, which was the most influential party among Poles, who presented Arthur Balfour, British Foreign Secretary, with a memorandum, in which he openly stated that nobody in Poland believed in the possibility of rebuilding their statehood in cooperation with Russia. He went on to argue that the only way out was to create an independent Polish State, which would span over such governorates (guberniyas) as Grodno Governorate, Vilna Governorate, and the majority of Minsk Governorate[2]. Another bone of contention between the representatives of both nations was the issue of the national affiliation of Catholics living across those lands. In line with a popular stereotype, all

[1] D. Tarasiuk, *Między nadzieją a niepokojem. Działalność społeczno-kulturalna i polityczna Polaków na wschodniej Białorusi w latach 1905–1918*, Lublin 2007, pp. 112–116.

[2] R. Dmowski, *Polityka polska i odbudowa państwa*, vol. 2, pp. 219–220, 269; J. Waskan, *Problem przynależności państwowej ziem byłego Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego w myśli politycznej obozu narodowego 1893–1921*, Bydgoszcz 2006, pp. 178–180; D. Tarasiuk, *Polski obóz narodowy w Rosji w latach 1917*–1918, Lublin 2014.

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Catholics were identified with Poles. Belarusian activists strongly opposed this. For instance, during its convention in July 1917, the Belarusian Socialist Assembly, at the initiative of Arkadiusz Smolicz, lodged a protest with Polish organisations against Belarusian Catholics being recognised as Poles. The complexity of this problem was very accurately captured by Stefan Żardecki, a refugee from the Kingdom of Poland. He portrayed a certain group of people inhabiting Belarusian lands by describing one of Minsk clerks as follows: "He didn't give away his beliefs or nationality, spoke fluent and correct Russian and Polish, was a Catholic, so probably 'a local', meaning neither a Pole, nor a Belarusian"[3].

This discrepancy between the proposals of both parties forced the Poles living in Belarus to come down on one side of the fence or the other.

Only a small number of Catholic landowners associated with Poland considered themselves Belarusians and supported the efforts of the Belarusian national movement. The most prominent representatives of this group included Roman Skirmunt and Magdalena Radziwiłłowa. After the February Revolution, in addition to Skirmunt, a few more major landowners raised in the Polish culture opted for affiliation with Belarus. These included, i. a., Edward Woyniłłowicz and Hieronim Drucki-Lubecki[4]. The former later recollected that landowner support for the Belarusian movement after the February Revolution was motivated by their desire to give Belarusians the sense of distinctiveness from Russians, who, in turn, found themselves gripped by the revolutionary spirit[5]. However, later these landowners got scared of the social extremism of the Belarusian movement and distanced themselves from it[6]. Over time, landowners built up a very negative image of the Belarusian people, namely that of socialists, who were difficult to associate with[7]. The number of those who, even if considered themselves Belarusians, supported the Polish movement was far greater. In this case, the term Belarusian was more of a reference to the place of residence, rather than that to national affiliation. In his letter published in "Nowy Kurier Litewski", a Polish newspaper published in Minsk, Cywiński wrote that even though he was Polish by descent and culture, it was his duty to "work primarily in the country he was born in". Marian Massonius found himself at a national identity crossroads. During one of his lectures he said "We, Belarusians through and through, conquered by Polishness, proudly admit it"[8].

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[3] Biblioteka Narodowa w Warszawie (National Library in Warsaw), akc. 8037, S. Żardecki, *Mijają lata – mijają i ludzie. Wspomnienia*, vol. 3, *Pierwsze lata po studiach – Wojna światowa. Rewolucja w Rosji. Okres 1912–1918 r.,* p. 155.

[4] "Nowy Kurier Litewski", 30 March/12 April 1917, No. 84, p. 3.

[5] E. Woyniłłowicz, *Wspomnienia (1847–1928),* Wilno 1931, p. 211.

[6] В. Гадлеўскі, *Зь беларускага палітычнага жыцьця ў Менску ў 1917–18 гг*., "Спадчына" 1997, No. 5, pp. 22–23.

[7] J. Jurkiewicz, *Nasze widzenie Białorusinów w XX w. (do 1939 r.),* "Dzieje Najnowsze" (Recent History), 1995, vol. 27, No. 2, p. 70.

[8] Archiwum Polskiej Akademii Nauk w Warszawie (Archives of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw) (APAN), III-4, *Diariusz Michała Stanisława Kossakowskiego*, vol. 2, p. 222.

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However, in 1917 it was not them who played a decisive role in determining the attitude of the Polish community towards the Belarusian movement. This attitude was largely shaped by the Polish Minsk Area Council (Rada Polska Ziemi Mińskiej), which aspired to be the local government body for the Polish community. It comprised Polish politicians who recognised the democratic and patriotic priorities of both right-wing and initially also left-wing views. As a result, the Council was a place where opposing political views, including those concerning attitudes towards the Belarusian movement, often clashed. The Executive Committee of the Polish Minsk Area Council took the position that the development of the Belarusian movement could no longer be ignored. It opted for working out a joint stance with Belarusians to have some influence over the direction of this development[9]. At that time, many Poles believed they could support the Belarusian movement to stir up anti-Russian attitudes. This is shown in the words of Włodzimierz Kryński, who noted during the founding convention of the Council that "[at that time] it [was] usually impossible to define what [was] Polish and what [was] Belarusian [there]"[10]. Initially, the majority of the Polish Minsk Area Council members rejected the plans to annex this territory to the future independent Poland, in favour of securing the autonomy of Belarus within Russia.

Efforts to establish friendly relations with Belarusian politicians can be seen in the address delivered by the representative of the Council on 21 July 1917 during the convention of delegates of Belarusian organisations, held in Minsk. His words about the local Poles' looking forward to "live as neighbours in friendly relations with Belarusians and work jointly towards the benefit of their shared homeland" received an ovation from the delegates[11]. During the debate on education held by the Municipal Council of Minsk, Mieczysław Porowski, speaking for the Polish community, stood up for the right of Belarusians to be educated in their native tongue. He expressed his conviction that they had an absolute right to revive their former language they used to speak in the 16th century[12].

Over time, the attitude of the Polish Minsk Area Council to the Belarusian movement, like the attitude of the majority of Poles there, became much colder. Already in December 1917 its representatives did not welcome the participants of the First All-Belarusian Convention[13]. But the relations between the two groups were not broken off. On 31 December 1917, at the initiative of Jazep Waronko, the Executive Committee of the First All-Belarusian Convention admitted also some representatives of national minorities, including Poles. The Polish community was represented by Aleksander Prystor, plenipotentiary of the Polish War Casualty Assistance Association (Polskie

[9] Archiwum Akt Nowych w Warszawie (The Central Archives of Modern Records in Warsaw), Centralna Agencja Prasowa w Lozannie, Folder 60, 20, Życie polskie na Litwie nieokupowanej.

[10] "Gazeta Polska", 6/19 June 1917, No. 135.

[11] "Вольная Беларусь", 3 August 1917, No. 11, p. 2.

[12] Национальный исторический архив Беларуси в Минске, ф. 24, оп. 1, д. 3659, k. 55, Пратакол заседания Минской городской думы … 11 September 1917.

[13] "Вольная Беларусь", 15 December 1917, No. 34, p. 1.

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Towarzystwo Pomocy Ofiarom Wojny), member of the Polish Socialist Party (PPS), not involved with the Minsk circle. He was also the main link between the Committee and the Polish Minsk Area Council[14].

On the other hand, a positive attitude to the demands put forward by the Belarusian movement was adopted by the Polish Democratic Union (PZD). In its communication, its Organising Committee stated, e.g.: "In our operations within White Russia – [will be – ad. D. T.] acting towards amicable cooperation with other nationalities in the spirit of freedom and democracy, while respecting the autonomy of this country and in particular the national Belarusian movement"[15]. The next rally of PZD in March 1917 addressed the issue of attitudes towards Belarusians. Adamowicz welcomed the Belarusian movement and envisaged it having "excellent future prospects"[16]. Despite the radicalisation of Belarusian activists' views, Polish democrats persisted in their efforts to cooperate with them. A representative of PZD welcomed the participants of the First All-Belarusian Convention. In January 1918, during the debate on their integration, PZD and Polish Peasants' Union (PZL) developed a programme that addressed the need for a complete independence of Belarus, while allowing for the national and cultural autonomy of the Polish minority[17].

Support for Belarusians, although limited, was seen in Polish newspapers published in Minsk. "Nowy Kurier Litewski", a local daily, provided coverage, e.g. on the Belarusian convention in March. An anonymous journalist wrote: "In their efforts to establish Lithuania and White Russia as independent administrative units, the participants of the Belarusian Convention can be sure to find most faithful and committed supporters among the Poles living there"[18]. In its "Chronicle" column, on a number of occasions, the daily published information about Belarusian conventions and meetings, especially when these had been attended by right-wing activists. "Dziennik Miński", the mouthpiece of the Polish Minsk Area Council, published an article about the First All-Belarusian Convention, which welcomed the Belarusian national movement with evident sympathy, while also emphasising, with regret, the dominance of revolutionaries among the delegates, whose primary concern was to take over landowners' estates. The anonymous journalist who wrote this article expressed his hope that the revolutionaries would eventually lose[19]. When describing the convention itself, the author, writing as K. P., pointed out a number of verbal attacks against Poles[20]. Nevertheless,

[14] Biblioteka Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego w Krakowie (The Library of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow), 9818 III, J. Osmołowski, *Wspomnienia z lat 1914–1921*, vol. 2, p. 487; *Krótki zarys zagadnienia białoruskiego*, Warszawa 1928, p. 53.

[15] Centralne Archiwum Wojskowe (Central Military Archive) (CAW), Formacje Wschodnie, 122.100.13, 6, Z komunikatu Komitetu Organizacyjnego PZD… 17/30 March 1917.

[16] "Nowy Kurier Litewski", 21 March/3 April 1917, No. 77, p. 3.

[17] "Echo Polskie", 13/26 January 1918, No. 7, p. 2.

[18] "Nowy Kurier Litewski", 29 March/11 April 1917, No. 83, p. 2.

[19] "Dziennik Miński", 12/25 December 1917, No. 136, p. 3.

[20] *Ibidem*, 24 December 1917/6 I 1918, No. 147, p. 2.

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on 26 February 1918, the "Dziennik Miński" daily published an article by an unknown author, which addressed the need for cooperation between two autochthonous nations living across Belarusian territory, namely Belarusians and Poles[21].

National Democracy, on the other hand, continued to deny the significance and strength of the developing Belarusian movement. At the same time, it vehemently rejected any claims stating that Belarusian Poles were Polonised Belarusians. Its representatives argued that even if this was the case, it had lost its significance, since it was the present attitude of such people that mattered[22]. In December 1917, "Placówka", a ND newspaper published at the time in Minsk, was outraged to communicate the disturbing fact that Duchess Magdalena Radziwiłłowa campaigned among Belarusian peasants against the Polish armed forces[23]. Earlier, "Nowy Kurier Lwowski" had published an article that strongly criticised Poles who also considered themselves Belarusians. Its authors argued that Poles could support the Belarusian movement, but only as Poles[24]. As accurately noted by "Wolnaja Biełarus", a Belarusian newspaper, many Poles could not comprehend that democrats from Belarus would not want their country annexed to the revived Polish State[25]. In his letter published in "Dziennik Miński", Adolf Zaleski accused Belarusian activists of facilitating the Russification of Catholics by introducing the Belarusian language into churches[26].

This Belarusian conundrum was usually not understood also by refugees from the Kingdom of Poland. Landowner refugees strongly opposed initiatives to recognise the right of Belarusians to self-determination. They did not understand why landowners from Belarusian governorates would voluntarily relinquish their dominant political positions to Belarusians. In his memoirs, Władysław Glinka wrote, e.g.: "Can these poor, savage Belarusian people […] be considered spiritual leaders of this land? […] This is a tabula rasa, blank slate, if you will, on which no one has written anything yet. […] Only in Poland, with its influence and culture, can this country and its uncivilised people find salvation"[27]. Michał Stanisław Kossakowski, writing about the Belarusian movement in his "Diariusz" in December 1917, emphasised its feebleness and anti-Polish character. Addressing the question why the Belarusian slate to the National Constituent Assembly won so few votes, he stated: "Only now do Belarusians organise; movement leaders want to accelerate the process of making the nation ready for independence. They hold one convention after another, during which their delegates debate in Russian"[28].

[21] *Ibidem*, 26 February 1918, No. 34, p. 1.
[22] "Na Straży", April 1918, pp. 11–12.
[23] "Placówka", 16/29 December 1917, No. 2, p. 1.
[24] "Nowy Kurier Litewski", 26 April/9 May 1917, No. 104, p. 2.
[25] "Вольная Беларусь", 21 July 1917, No. 8, p. 4.
[26] "Dziennik Miński" 19 October/1 November 1917, No. 92, p. 2.
[27] W. Glinka, *Pamiętnik z wielkiej wojny*, vol. 2, Part 1, Warszawa 1937, p. 68.
[28] APAN, III-4, *Diariusz Michała Stanisława Kossakowskiego*, vol. 2, p. 482.

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Conciliatory efforts on the Polish part never received a response from Belarusians. It can be assumed that anti-Belarusian attitudes among Poles living in Minsk were primarily due to the more and more anti-Polish position of Belarusian politicians.

The Belarusian National Committee, established on 25 March 1917 in Minsk, in its declaration "Ad Biełaruskaho Nacyjanalnaho Kamitietu" opted for the autonomy of Belarus within the democratic Russian Federation and heavily criticised supporters of annexation to Poland[29]. Over time, anti-Polish statements became more and more unfavourable to the political aspirations of Poles. In late 1917, at the initiative of the Western Front Military Poles Union (ZWPFZ) a meeting was convened in Minsk for the representatives of military Poles, Ukrainians, Belarusians and Tatars to adopt a common stance on Bolsheviks. As noted by the Polish military, agreement with Belarusians was very difficult because their precondition for entering into negotiations was "for the Polish military to agree to acknowledge the independence of Belarus and drop any claims to White Russia on behalf of Poland"[30]. Only a small group of Belarusian politicians saw their future in affiliation with Poland. This group included, e.g. Paweł Aleksiuk.

This was shown in the publications appearing in the Belarusian press in 1917 in Minsk. For instance, already the first issue of "Wolna Bielarus" (WB), a magazine published in the Belarusian language, whose Editor-in-chief was Jazep Losik, its publisher being initially the Belarusian National Committee, and from July 1917 the Belarusian Culture Society, described in detail the political objective of the Belarusian movement in a manifesto article. This goal was for Belarus to achieve autonomy as part of the democratic Russian State[31]. This issue was first addressed in the newspaper by Jazep Losik, its Editor-in-chief, in a series of articles entitled *Автономия Белоруссии,* published in June 1917[32] One of the steps to accomplish it was for Belarusians to select their own representatives, rather than Poles or Russians, to the National Constituent Assembly[33]. S. Rak-Michajłowski published an article in which he called for an election manifesto to be drawn up. It was to include the promises of an educational system based on the Belarusian language, and cultural and national autonomy (and, possibly, also territorial autonomy within the Russian Federative Republic). In one of the subsequent issues, the author emphasised that there was nothing to be feared about cultural and national autonomy, as it did not mean separation from Russia, because that was something the Belarusian nation would never accept[34]. "WB" articles referred to Poles

[29] Ф. Турук , *Белорусское движение: Очерк истории национального и революционного движения белорусов*, Москва, 1921, pp. 89–90.

[30] CAW, Relacje, 400.2189.10, Sprawozdanie z działalności Związku Wojskowych Polaków Frontu Zachodniego, pp. 7–8.

[31] "Вольная Беларусь", 28 May 1917, No. 1, p. 2.

[32] Я. Лесик, *Автономия Белоруссии*, Минск 1917; С. Рудовіч, *Час выбару: праблемы самавызначэння Беларусі у 1917 г.*, Мінск 2001, p. 123.

[33] "Вольная Беларусь", 28 May 1917, No. 1, p. 2.

[34] *Ibidem*, 3 August 1917, No. 11, p. 1.

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from Lithuania and Belarus as "traitors and renegades" and "Judases"[35]. The immediate reason for these accusations was a letter published in "Gazeta Polska", which mentioned the alleged efforts of Belarusian residents to be annexed to Poland. One of the subsequent issues of the Belarusian magazine criticised another article published in "Gazeta Polska", which discussed objections to anti-Polish sentiments in "Homan", another Belarusian periodical published in Vilnius in the Belarusian language. In fact, it reprinted some major anti-Polish statements from that periodical[36]. Moreover, "WB" went on to argue that there were very few Poles, if any, in Belarus. Poles were accused of confusing the terms nationality and religion[37].

An event that had a profound impact on the development of Polish-Belarusian relations was the seizure of Minsk in February 1918 by Polish and Belarusian forces.

On 19 February 1918, the Bolshevik army started to withdraw from Minsk. In that situation, both Poles and Belarusians decided to take over the city, mainly for propaganda purposes. Both parties not only commenced their operations independently, but competed against each other, aspiring to subjugate the other party. It turned out that the Belarusian forces were weaker and started to be pushed out of the positions they had captured before. The two sides might even have engaged in clash[38]. No later than on 20 February 1918, a formal agreement was worked out[39]. However, Poles did not consider Belarusians a party to be reckoned with[40]. Refusal on the part of Poles to acknowledge the right of the National Secretariat established on 21 February 1918 to wield power in Ukraine caused the rather difficult relations with Belarusian diplomats to deteriorate even further[41]. In February 1918, "Dziennik Miński" published an article, which put forward the following claim: "By acknowledging Belarusians as the rulers of this country, Poles would enter into agreement with their appropriate and competent representation, while preserving all their national and cultural rights. The present Belarusian council does not provide such representation"[42].

Both Poles and Belarusians were aware of the fact that by cooperating with each other they could reap greater political benefits. However, the commencement of cooperation involved a number of problems, which were due to the attitudes of both parties. Often they would not be willing to seek agreement or try to understand the views of the other party. The majority of Belarusian politicians would make the collaboration with Poles conditional upon their agreement to acknowledge the efforts of Belarus towards

[35] *Ibidem*, 28 May 1917, No. 1, p. 3.
[36] *Ibidem*, 21 July 1917, No. 8, p. 4.
[37] *Ibidem*, 24 June 1917, No. 4, p. 2.
[38] O. Łatyszonek, *Białoruskie formacje wojskowe 1917–1923,* Białystok 1995, pp. 71–72.
[39] "Goniec Miński", 21 February 1918, No. 12, p. 1.
[40] APAN, III-4, *Diariusz Michała Stanisława Kossakowskiego*, vol. 3, p. 186.
[41] D. Tarasiuk, *Stosunki polsko-białoruskie w przededniu ogłoszenia niepodległości Białoruskiej Republiki Ludowej (luty–marzec 1918),* [in:] *Lata Wielkiej Wojny: Rok 1918 w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej*, eds. D. Grinberg, J. Snopko, G. Zackiewicz, Białystok 2010, pp. 152–163.
[42] "Dziennik Miński", 26 February 1918, No. 34, p. 3.

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its independence[43]. However, many Poles considered it unacceptable and wished to annex the Belarusian territory into the Polish State that was about to be revived. For this reason, they would often believe that the Belarusian organisations which opposed such plans had no right to act on behalf of the Belarusian nation as a whole.

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Summary

This article explores changes in the attitudes of Poles towards the Belarusian national aspirations during great transformations in Russia, i.e. in 1917. At that time, Poland had to acknowledge the fact that its efforts to establish itself as the protector of the Belarusian peoples had petered out. Consequently, the Poles adopted different attitudes to possible cooperation with Belarusian politicians, from denying such a possibility altogether (National Democracy) to considering them equal partners (Polish Democratic Union, or PZD).

[43] CAW, Relacje, catalogue number 400.2189.10, Sprawozdanie z działalności Związku Wojskowych Polaków Frontu Zachodniego, p. 8.

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Key words: History of Belarus, Belarusian national movement, Poles in Kresy, history of Minsk, Polish organisations in Belarus

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia zmiany stosunku Polaków do białoruskich aspiracji narodowych w Mińsku w czasie wielkich przemian w Rosji, czyli w 1917 r. Polacy musieli wówczas zaakceptować fakt, że polityka dalszego pełnienia roli patrona ludności białoruskiej już się wyczerpała. Wśród Polaków doszło wtedy do ukształtowania się różnych poglądów na możliwość współpracy z politykami białoruskimi, od pozycji negowania takiej możliwości (endecja) po traktowanie ich jako równoprawnych partnerów (PZD).

Słowa kluczowe: historia Białorusi, białoruski ruch narodowy, Polacy na Kresach, historia Mińska, organizacje polskie na Białorusi

Рэзюме

У публікацыі адлюстраваны змены ў адносінах палякаў да беларускіх нацыянальных памкненняў у Мінску ў час важных трансфармацыяў у Расіі, менавіта ў 1917 г. У гэты час палякі павінны былі прыняць факт, што палітыка далейшага імкнення да ролі патрона беларускага насельніцтва скончылася. Адначасова, у асяроддзі палякаў сфарміраваўся спектр розных поглядаў на магчымасць супрацоўніцтва з беларускімі палітыкамі, ад пазіцыі адмаўлення такой магчымасці (Нацыянальна-дэмакратычная партыя Беларусі) да раўнапраўнага партнёрскага стаўлення (Польскі дэмакратычны саюз Беларусі).

Ключавыя словы: гісторыя Беларусі, беларускі нацыянальны рух, палякі на ўсходніх ускраінах, гісторыя Мінска, польскія арганізацыі ў Беларусі