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# Situation of Organizations Uniting the Polish Minority in Belarus: the Past, the Present and the Outlook

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## Polish organizations in Belarus: the past and present

The first organization uniting the Polish minority was founded in 1988. This year also saw the birth of Adam Mickiewicz Polish Scientific and Educational Society in Hrodna. Similar associations were established in Brest, Minsk, Lida, Baranavičy etc. In 1990 they were united in the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB) which is the oldest and biggest Polish organization in Belarus.

The Union of Poles in Belarus is concentrated on cultural and educational issues. It organizes celebrations of religious and national holidays, festivals, scientific conferences, contests about literature and the Polish language as well as history and geography, takes care of protection of monuments and sites of national memory. Every year ZPB organizes summer vacations for children and adolescents in Poland. ZPB consisted of Polish Academy of Science, Polish Medical Association,

Association of Polish Plastic Artists, Polish Youth Society, Polish Veterans' Association, Union of Home Army Soldiers, Association of Polish Victims of Political Repressions, The Polish Nurses and Midwives Association.

Apart from the Union of Poles in Belarus there exists also "Scouting"-youth organization which deals with upbringing and organization of spare time for youngsters, Polish Alma Mater which provides didactic support for teachers, Polish Cultural Society of Lida town which is a local organization based in the region of Lipsk near Hrodna. There are numerous other organizations registered in the Ministry of Justice, among them are Club of Polish National Traditions, Polish Child Group "Grodzieńskie Słowniki" and Non-profit Polish National Group "Lechici" Association.

All these organizations operate thanks to the financial support granted by the Polish Government. The support from the Belarusian government is insignificant.

## Legal basis of activity

The activity of Polish organizations as well as the activity of "ordinary" Belarusian organizations is regulated by Belarusian legislation and also:

Act on Associations,

By decree of the president of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2001 No. 8 "On certain rules regulating the course of receiving and using non-returnable financial help from abroad" etc.

However, because of being specific, Polish minority organizations in their activity must additionally take into account the following: Act on national minorities in the Republic of Belarus of 11<sup>th</sup> November 1992 and the Treaty between the Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on Good-Neighbourly Relations and Friendly Cooperation, Agreement between The Republic of Poland and the Republic of Belarus on protection of graves and memory sites of war victims and repressions, signed in Brest on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1995, as well as the agreement between the Polish government and the Belarusian government on cooperation in the field of culture, science and education.

Apart from the Ministry of Justice and its local branches activity of Polish

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organizations is under the control of the Committee on Religion and Religious Minorities, the subdivision of Council of Ministers of the Republic of Poland. This institution frequently intervenes in activity of Polish national minorities. As early as in 1991 there was a disclosure of the document which showed the plan of action in the field of "marginalization of the Union of Poles in Belarus". Among recommendations were "supporting dissenting groups", "supporting all organizations formed from the Union of Poles" etc.

### **Conflict about the Union of Poles and its influence on the situation of the Polish minority**

Current situation of Polish organizations and the Polish minority in general was largely influenced by the conflict connected with ZPB which started in 2005. It happened due to the interference of Belarusian Special Services in the activity of a social organization and subsequently canceling the results of the party management elections which the authorities found unsatisfactory. The war in media, when the Polish organization was accused of being "the fifth column", has on the whole influenced the Polish minority. People who work in state-owned working places, especially on manager posts, try not to be involved in activity of Polish organizations. At the same time, when threatened, Polish organizations "has stucked together". Despite the efforts of authorities to make other Polish organizations condemn the leaders of the Union of Poles, nothing similar has happened in the course of conflict.

Owing to the efforts of authorities, "the Union of Poles", adhering to the system, has been established-in fact local branches of this organization are administered by ideological departments of local Executive Committees. The activity of main executive bodies (presi-

dent, Principal Council) is directly supervised by KGB. However, in spite of various support for activities of this "social organization", it failed to gain recognition among Poles residing in Belarus. First of all it is far too obvious that the leaders are associated with Belarusian Special Services. What is more, activists of authorities supported "The Union of Poles" have taken part in propaganda TV programmes which were aimed at slandering Poland and Poles during the Belarusian-Polish conflict.

Polish education has suffered the heaviest blow. In Belarus there are two schools which teach in Polish: in Vaukavysk and Hrodna (the Union of Poles owns both schools). However, the overwhelming majority of children learn Polish as an additional course in ordinary schools. Authorities are reluctant to contacts between Polish language teachers and directors of such schools with Polish diplomatic missions. For instance in September this year Uladzimir Trachimczyk, the director of Eliza Orzeszkowa school in Milkowszczyzna region near Minsk, was dismissed for inviting a Polish consul to a school party celebrating the beginning of the new school year. Before the conflict, diplomatic missions were providing didactic support and help for the teachers of Polish. In this situation the significant number of directors gave up on teaching Polish in schools which is frequently explained by the lack of interest from parents. In these conditions the number of children learning Polish has diminished.

### **Outlook**

As in the case of "ordinary" Belarusian non-governmental organizations, normal running of Polish social organizations is connected with respecting basic human rights by the Belarusian authorities and liberalization of legislation in the field of social organizations' activity. As far as Polish organizations are concerned relations between Poland

and Belarus could be warmed up if activity of Polish organizations started to be normal and its further development possible. However, it appears that in the present political situation it is impossible to meet these conditions. In connection with this further pressure and restrictions on legal activity of Polish social organizations can be expected. The regime in power is interested in taking over the control of Polish organizations and in downgrading influence of independent activists on the Polish minority. Achieving these goals by authorities depends on determination and creativity of organization members.