



Belarus – Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 24 February 2012

Information on the relationship between Belarus and Poland. Do Belorussians resent Polish people as part of general resentment of westernisation? Is there resentment towards ethnic Poles in Belarus who benefit from the Polish government scheme which offers Polish ID cards to persons of Polish origin?

A 2008 *Minority Rights Group International* report, in a section headed “Current Issues”, states:

“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.” (Minority Rights Group International (2008) *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Belarus: Poles*)

A report from the independent Belarusian news agency *BelaPAN* states:

“The Belarusian government declared its official goal to build mutually beneficial relations with European countries without division lines. Many ordinary Belarusians maintain close people-to-people contacts with Poland. On the other hand, Belarus' official media have been very hostile toward Poland, accusing it of seeking to take control of part of Belarusian territory or underwriting attempts to overthrow the government. Minsk is angry at Warsaw for its support of civic society and independent radio and TV channels broadcasting to Belarus. Speaking about Poland's policies with regard to Belarus, Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski quoted Horace: ‘You own safety is at stake when your neighbor's house is in flames.’ The Polish minority accounts for 3.1 percent of Belarus' population of about 10 million, according to the 2009 census.” (BelaPAN (23 January 2012) *Merger of two Unions of Poles unrealistic under current government*)

A report from the *Economist Intelligence Unit* states:

“Some 400,000 Poles live in Belarus, amounting to 4% of the country's population. They are represented by an organisation, the Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB). In 2005, when Andzielika Borys was elected as head of the ZPB, the organisation was banned by the Belarusian authorities and a rival union was established under the leadership of Stanislaw Syamashka, which was loyal to the Belarusian government. Although it is a non-political organisation set up to promote Polish linguistic and cultural traditions among ethnic Poles living in Belarus, the ZPB is also the largest independent non-governmental organisation (NGO) in the country. Thus it has the potential to be a political threat to the rule of Belarus's president, Alyaksandr Lukashenka. Since 2005 some of the ZPB's 20,000 members, and in particular its leaders, have been subject to harassment by the local authorities. The Polish government, in turn, has refused to recognise the legitimacy of Mr Syamashka's organisation, even though its membership is also made up exclusively of ethnic

Poles.” (Economist Intelligence Unit (29 April 2010) *Poland/Belarus politics: Patriot games*)

See also the *Economist Intelligence Unit* report which states:

“Poland's regional foreign policy was dominated in recent weeks by mounting diplomatic tension with Belarus. Poland threatened Belarus with international action following the intensification of repression of the ethnic Polish minority in Belarus. In February Belarusian police arrested the leader of the banned Union of Poles in Belarus (ZPB), Andzielika Borys, along with 40 other members of the organisation. This followed an earlier court decision to hand the group's headquarters over to a rival, officially sanctioned Polish ethnic minority organisation, which is loyal to the country's authoritarian president, Alyaksandar Lukashenka.” (Economist Intelligence Unit (4 March 2010) *The political scene: Poland and Belarus argue over the treatment of ethnic Poles*)

A *BelaPAN* report refers to the “Polish Charter” as follows:

“The Belarusian House of Representatives is demanding a parliamentary hearing on the Polish Charter that is offered to people of Polish descent living in Belarus, Representative Mikhail Orda said at the National Assembly's meeting with government officials on December 17. ‘Voters approach me and ask why the document of the foreign state is issued on the territory of Belarus, why people are being divided and who has entitled the Polish side to select organizations to issue Polish descent certificates to Belarusians,’ Mr. Orda said. The charter (Karta Polaka) is issued to former Polish citizens and those who have relatives of Polish descent, even in the fourth generation. It gives extensive privileges to the holder such as a free multi-entry visa and the rights to work, set up a company and study in Poland similar to those exercised by Polish nationals.” (BelaPAN (17 December 2009) *Belarusian lawmakers question legality of Polish Charter*)

See also *BelaPAN* report which states:

“The charter (Karta Polaka) is issued to former Polish citizens and those who have relatives of Polish descent, even in the fourth generation. It gives extensive privileges to the holder such as a free multi-entry visa and the rights to work, set up a company and study in Poland similar to those exercised by Polish nationals, as well as travel discounts. About 250,000 people may be entitled to the Polish Charter, the Polish authorities estimate. The charter has been issued to more than 14,000 Belarusians already. The Karta Polaka law passed the Polish parliament in September 2007. It came under fire from the Belarusian state media and foreign ministry in February 2008, with the latter alleging that its enforcement may ‘seriously destabilize interethnic relations in our country, spark tensions in Belarusian society, disrupt its stability and give rise to mistrust between Belarusian nationals of different descent.’” (BelaPAN (18 April 2011) *Criticism of Polish Charter law may be intended to deflect EU's attention from human rights abuses in Belarus*)

A report published by the *EUDO Citizenship Observatory*, in a section titled “The Polish Ethnicity Card and Belarusian distress” (section 4.2), states:

“Unlike in other European countries, the introduction by the Polish state of a Polish Ethnicity Card stirred a wave of controversy in Belarus and triggered an extremely negative reaction by Belarusian authorities. It should be recalled that the law on the Polish Ethnicity Card passed in September 2007 applies to ethnic Poles living in CIS

and Baltic countries who cannot obtain dual citizenship. The card allows them to freely cross into Poland, be admitted into Polish educational institutions, and receive government stipends. Holders of the card are also eligible to work in Poland. The Belarusian authorities called the introduction of the Polish Ethnicity Card 'absurdity, political bribery and provocation', claiming that 'the selective approach to the issuance of the Polish Ethnicity Card leads to the differentiation of the Belarusian citizens of the Polish origin and discrimination.' They went even further and said that the introduction of the Polish Ethnicity Card could 'seriously destabilize relations between the two nations, increase tension in Belarusian society, and breed mistrust between Belarusian citizens of different nationalities'" (EUDO Citizenship Observatory (April 2011) *Country Report: Belarus*, p.19)

A recent *BelaPAN* report states:

"A bill prohibiting civil servants from using the so-called Pole's Card came into force on February 11. The Pole's Card (Karta Polaka), also translated as the Polish Charter or Polish Card, is a document confirming the holder's belonging to the Polish nation. It was introduced by the Pole's Card Act that was adopted by the Polish parliament in September 2007 and came into force in March 2008. The draft legislation passed the House of Representatives in December last year. The law 'is aimed at eliminating the conflict of interests' that civil servants might have, according to officials. The legislation bans civil servants from using benefits and privileges offered by other countries in connection with their political or religious views or nationality, and from obtaining documents entitling the holders to such benefits and privileges. Civil servants are required to surrender their Polish Cards and other such documents to authorities. Failure to meet the requirement would constitute grounds for dismissal." (BelaPAN (11 February 2012) *Civil servants banned from using Pole's Card*)

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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