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History and Perspectives of Intercultural Dialog Between Poland and Belarus. Based on Biographies of Prominent Personalities

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to draw attention to the constant relevance of intercultural dialogue as the way to go beyond stereotypes and ignorance between nations and as a key factor in preventing conflicts and developing intercultural communication skills. A special emphasis is put on the mutual awareness of the historical and cultural heritage and the great input made to it by the outstanding personalities living in the Rzeczpospolita I, the interwar and post-war periods. The text briefly describes the biographies of Kościuszko, Ogiński, Skirmunt and Niemen as characters belonging to two cultures. The literature on the subject was selected in a way to emphasize the intercultural nature of the above-mentioned personalities. The article also names the scientists, writers, political activists who are currently working on maintaining a dialogue between Poland and Belarus. The present state of cultural exchange between the two countries is briefly described in the text, the existing difficulties are defined and the attitudes aimed at preventing the mutual alienation of the two neighboring countries in the next generations are designated. In conclusion it is stated that Polish-Belarusian dialogue, considered from the perspective of mutual cultural heritage, has the potential for further development, under the condition of mutual appreciation of the cultural background of the past and the memories of it preserved by the nations.

KEY WORDS: intercultural dialog, Polish culture, Belarusian culture, Rzeczpospolita I, intercultural communication.

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Introduction

The following text introduces the problem of intercultural dialog by the example of Belarus and Poland. It represents the short analysis on history and cultural evolution of the two countries, reflected in the biographies and activity of the prominent peoples. The historical facts are followed by the author's conclusions regarding the ways to a fruitful intercultural dialogue between the two neighboring countries in the up-to-date social-political context.

The main aim of the article is to emphasize the importance of the shared cultural values for the peaceful development and interaction between nations. Special attention is paid to finding the common ground in educating people's awareness of the possible problems coming from neglecting this sphere. The aim of the article goes in consonance with the new edition of the UNESCO Declaration for Culture from 2022, which underlines

the importance of enhancing synergies between culture and education, acknowledging the imperative of context-relevant education, which encompasses cultural heritage, history and traditional knowledge... (MONDIACULT-2022/CPD/6, p. 4, art. 13).

The common heritage for the nations of Poland and Belarus is first of all the period of the Rzeczpospolita I, when a large number of nationalities, languages and confessions coexisted on the territory of one state.

Its common heritage still unites Belarusian and Polish cultures, with the similar ethnic groups (GUS, 2002), (BELSAT, 2019), customs and traditions and artistic achievements (for example the first printed literary works almost simultaneously appeared in Polish (*History of the Martyrdom of Our Lord Jesus Christ*, 1508) and in Old Belarusian (*Psalterz*, 1517). It was the period of cultural masterpieces creation and architectural monuments construction that are famous up to nowadays (orthodox frescoes in Lublin dd. XV and castles in Mir and Nesvizh in Belarus (dd. XVI–XVII)). This period also gave many prominent names to history. Still if we take a closer look at the common background of Poland and Belarus, we will notice that the cultural dialogue between Polish and Belarusian nations was not limited to the times of Rzeczpospolita I, but continued also in the 19–20th century.

The first part of the text focuses on the personalities of the famous citizens of Rzeczpospolita, Russian Empire and PRL born on the territory, which now belongs to Belarus. Among them there were the outstanding social-political activists – Tadeusz Kościuszko, Roman Skirmunt, musicians – Michał Kleofas Ogiński, Czesław Niemen, who enriched the culture of Poland and the world with their talent (Pisarenka & Jazykowich, 2008). Common places of remembrance and the people associated with the sites make

part of the dialogue between our cultures, becoming one of the reasons for getting to know each other better. That's why the first part of the text, based on the literary sources published both in Poland and Belarus, provides a look at the common heritage, underlining the facts that prove the strong cultural links that existed between the two countries in the past.

The second part of the text takes into account the critical points of the present situation in the cultural dialogue between Poland and Belarus and is based more on the current reports, taken from different online sources. It focuses on the activity of scientists, writers, historians and activists constructing the cultural interactions by their work.

The conclusion proposes the actions and attitudes that will favor the maintenance of the intercultural cooperation between the people of the two countries to prevent ignorance and hostility in the next generations.

Common Polish-Belarusian historical personalities

In 2017, on the initiative of the former ambassador of the Republic of Belarus, the Kościuszko monument was solemnly unveiled in the Swiss city of Solothurn (Sushczynski, 2019). Some time later Belarusians decided that Tadeusz Kościuszko should be honored also on the land where he was born. The money necessary for monument creation had been collected on the Internet by the Belarusian activists and the contractors for the pedestal and commemorative plaque did their work free of charge (www.belhistory.com).

The monument was placed near Kościuszko's manor-museum. The building had been reconstructed thirteen years earlier on the old foundation, according to the preserved drawings and descriptions. The manor-museum is very popular among tourists and in 2018 it gained the Belarusian Ministry of Sport and Tourism reward for the achievements (www.museumkossovo.by).

In the interview to Radio Racja Oleg Łatyszonek told about Kościuszko:

Kościuszko cannot be taken away from Poland... No one denies that Kościuszko was an outstanding Pole and undoubtedly considered himself to be a Pole, although he also called himself a Lithuanian. It must be remembered that a sense of nationality used to be different then from what we have now, like "I am a Pole and no one else". Kościuszko was a Pole, a Lithuanian, it is known that he was also a Ruthenian by origin, his relatives were Orthodox Ruthenians (Lajeuskaja, 2016)

Anatol Trafimczyk studied the memory of Belarusians about Kościuszko in literature and folklore (Trafimczyk, 2016). A. Małdis wrote that the positive image of the 1794

insurrection leader is preserved in the national memory (Maldzis, 1980). The image of Kościuszko also appeared in the works of the 19th century poets from the Belarusian territories – Jan Czeczot and Franciszek Bohuszewicz. A number of streets and squares are named after Kościuszko in Grodno, Brest, Kosów and Lida. Belarusian historians, e.g. Uładzimir Arlou and Konstancin Tarasau also emphasize the importance of this prominent personality for Belarusian and Polish cultures (Arlou, 2017; Tarasau, 1994).

Another outstanding figure from Belarusian-Polish past is somehow connected to the Kościuszko insurrection. The famous musician's name is Michał Kleofas Ogiński, who after returning from emigration settled in the Zalesie manor. To commemorate the insurrection he took part in, Ogiński had the inscription „To Kosciuszko's shadows” engraved on the stone. This stone is still preserved in the renovated manor park, where there is now a museum. People come to see the homeland of the creator of the famous polonaise in A-minor Farewell to the Fatherland. Ogiński's biography and his family tree are examples of the different cultures' influence on the fate of people. The composer's great-grandparents funded Orthodox monasteries, and Michał Kleofas himself took part in the Kościuszko uprising, but later served as a senator in the Russian Empire (red. Pisarenka, Jazykowich), (Zajewski, 2014). Like Kościuszko, Ogiński spent the last years of his life abroad. The same as the leader of the insurrection, he was born in contemporary Belarus, and its melancholic landscapes he farewelled leaving for emigration.

The Belarusian Zalesie Museum received the Ministry of Sport and Tourism of the Republic of Belarus award for the best regional museum of the 2021 year (www.ogin-skizalesse.by). Unfortunately visitor statistics are not published, nevertheless the prize means that Ogiński's name attracted a lot of people and it is still popular. The dialogue of our common heritage continues, and the fact that Ogiński came from Belarusian territories does not deprive him of the glory of a famous Polish composer, but also makes him a composer of many cultures.

The next turbulent time that Western Belarus and Poland experienced together was the beginning of the 20th century. The fate of Poles and Belarusians on both sides of the border dividing Belarus into two parts shaped differently at that time.

In the times of military doctrines, people who saw the solution in dialogue and conflict resolution had the hardest time. They became the object of persecution. The fate of Bronisław Taraszkiewicz (the creator of the first grammar of the Belarusian language and a member of the Sejm of the Rzeczpospolita II) and Roman Skirmunt (the Prime Minister of the Belarusian People's Republic and a senator of the 3rd term in the Rzeczpospolita II) were tragic. Roman Skirmunt's biography clearly shows the national identity formation process of a Polish nobility representative coming „from a Lithuanian family”, whose ancestors „spoke the Belarusian language at home” (Skirmunt, 1918).

Roman Skirmunt presented his ideas in the brochures *New slogans on the rebirth of Lithuanian nationality*(1904), *The voice of the past and the need for a moment*(1905). *The position of the nobility in Lithuania and Ruthenia* (1905) and others, in which he claimed, that

...it is not the nobility and the small intelligentsia that give color to the flag of the country, but the people. We should try to work together with the Lithuanian or Ruthenian people, with whom we constitute a single national entity for the common good of our country (Ro...munt, 1904).

His message, his inner voice changed along with the historical processes, which forced him to actively engage in social life on the side of the Belarusian revival supporters. In his work *The voice of the past and the need of the moment...* Skirmunt claimed that among the nobility there is a solid group of people devoted heart and soul to the history of their „little homeland – Lithuania or Ruthenia” (1905), understanding Lithuania and Ruthenia as the lands of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

After the revolution of 1905 and the peasants’ revolts in his family estate, Roman Skirmunt again spoke to the community which political views he shared, with the appeal for creation of a strong united national party to oppose anarchic and extreme movements (Smalanchuk, 2003, p. 148). This party was called the National Party of Lithuania and Belarus – it was supposed to unite various political movements, establish cooperation with representatives of different social groups and turn to the traditions of tolerance of the Rzeczpospolita I and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In the following years, Roman Skirmunt actively participated in the political life of the Russian Empire. He spoke out in the interests of the pluralism of views, defending national autonomy, but simultaneously emphasizing his belonging to Polish nationality (Smalanchuk, 2003, p. 459). However, the years 1915–1918 deepened the difference in the understanding of the „Polish interest” by the activists of the Polish community and the „natives”. Perhaps this disagreement of views encouraged Roman Skirmunt to join the Belarusian Society for Aid to War Victims, and then the Belarusian Committee, which were definitely pro-Belarusian (Rudowich, 2000). Skirmunt repeatedly demonstrated his ability to conduct a dialogue with representatives of different nationalities and social backgrounds, which resulted in his becoming the first Prime Minister of the Belarusian People’s Republic. Unfortunately, the dialogue of cultures and nationalities became the rudiments in the ideology of the 20th century superpowers. Roman Skirmunt’s activities met with criticism from both Russian Socialists and Polish nationalists, as internal conflicts continued to tear apart the radicalizing society. Skirmunt stuck to the negotiating position, regardless of the repeatedly changing political situation, looking for contacts with representatives of various countries and communities. The only social trend he could not cooperate with, although he tried, was radical social-

ism, or Bolshevism. Roman Skirmunt was sentenced to death by hostility and hatred and the role of the punishers was taken over by the peasants from his village in 1939 (Smalanchuk, 2003, p. 12).

The post-war years brought a new reality for both Belarus and Poland, and at the same time gave new opportunities for dialogue. Belarusians began to rediscover Poland, Polish writers were translated, repatriation programs made it possible for Poles to return to their homeland. In 1959, after the unification of the western and eastern parts of Belarus, Poles accounted for 6.7% of the population of the Belarusian Soviet Republic (Belstat). Belarusian and Polish intelligentsia were given the opportunity to establish contacts. The young generation of the 70s, coming from Grodno or Szczuczyn, listened to Czesław Niemen's songs that brought new beats to popular music. The Polish singer and composer was born in Stare Wasilisзки in the Grodno region, and took his pseudonym after the river on the banks of which he grew up and met his first love. After gaining fame and recognition, the musician returned to his birthplace twice, and was touched by the way everything had changed there (www.pawet.net). If he went there now, he would certainly feel happier, because his parents' house has become a house-museum, the interiors have been renovated, and the museum's manager and guide offers visitors apples from the old orchard, probably the same ones that little Czesław used to pick. On the 70th anniversary of the musician's birth in 2009, there was a song contest held in Stare Wasilisзки attended by performers from Poland and Belarus (Gurko and Bunkiewich, 2017). 10 years later, on the next anniversary, Niemen was commemorated with a plaque in Grodno, where he began his music studies(). Only time will tell, whether his next anniversary will be a reason for mass events and speeches.

The current situation and the perspectives of Poland-Belarus cultural dialog

Currently, 3% of the population of Belarus consider themselves to be of Polish nationality (Belstat, 2019). In return, the general population census in Poland showed that 48,737 citizens declared Belarusian identity (GUS, 2002). It was the third biggest non-Polish nationality declared by the citizens of the Republic of Poland. It is also worth noting that the number of Belarusians who do not have Polish citizenship but live in Poland permanently is estimated to be more than twice as high (www.gov.pl).

Social and cultural life beyond the eastern Polish border still goes on as it did in the times of the Rzeczpospolita I, in the interwar period and after World War II, although the conditions in which cultural activists have to work now are incredibly difficult (European Parliament, 2023). Not only Polish culture is paralyzed, as we some-

times see in the media, but also every movement, different from the Belarusian government plan. Nevertheless, regardless of the government's policies, it is our duty as scientists and humanists to support people of culture, to continue working on mutual understanding of our nations and to cultivate human sensitivity to the common Christian values. There is a constant interest of people in our common historic and artistic heritage, fueled by the hard work of the writers and historians who try to build bridges of cultures between our countries. For example, Uładzimir Arlou calls Tadeusz Kościuszko „our eminent compatriot” and describes the uprising of 1794 (Arlou, 2017). Belarusian poets of a new generation, such as Andrei Chadanowicz (culture.pl), Maria Martysiewicz and Hanna Jankuta, continue to translate Polish poets into Belarusian, multiplying our common cultural wealth (Glinski, 2023). Just like Cimoch Akudowicz, who hosts the popular program *Skaryna's mustache* on YouTube (about the common historical personalities of Belarus and Poland).

Belarusian people are aware of the monuments of our common history. For example, the Radziwiłł castles in Mir and Nievizh, being on the UNESCO list, are very popular with tourists – in 2019 they were visited by 329 and 426 thousand people, respectively (www.fcti.by). The state program for the reconstruction of the castles has been approved due to the popularity of the historical heritage. Poland is the main destination for Belarusian students studying abroad, and their number is growing every year (www.adukar.by). The Polish language is still popular among both young and old. Currently, regardless of the liquidation of many non-state organizations, Belarus remains a nation open to other cultures. Of the two Nobel Prize winners we have in Belarus, Svetlana Alexievich writes in Russian and declares herself Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian at the same time (www.svaboda.org). Aleś Bialacki, in turn, is a laureate of the Lech Wałęsa Award and an honorary citizen of the city of Genoa (www.prezydent.pl).

Conclusion

To sum up, it should be remembered that Poland and Belarus had a long common history, which left us not only an extensive infrastructure of archaeological monuments, but also memories and human fates that created the cultural and national environment of our countries. Both Poland and Belarus lie at the crossroads of trade and war routes, both have experienced periods of difficult formation of nationalities resisting their more powerful neighbors. Both Poland and Belarus have a long history of tolerance towards other cultures and religions.

It is important not to neglect this common value, to pass it on to future generations, so that they understand it as the common heritage of humanity. Belarusians together with Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians once formed a confederation. That

is why we cannot allow ourselves to destroy the reminders of this common national memory or miss out on the possibility of drawing on history. Otherwise it may serve no one but those who would like to come between us.

There are also historical and traditional differences between us, conditioned by a different background of national self-government, the dominance of various confessions, and a long period of communist ideology on the part of Belarus throughout the 20th century.

These realities – both common and different – oblige us to rethink historical traditions, to critically approach the entrenched stereotypes and attitudes. The rich common heritage could attract scientists, educators, people of culture, serve as material for cross-cultural research in history, political science, linguistics, comparative pedagogy, and become a source of inspiration for popular culture. Unfortunately, it must be admitted that many of the media messages, which could have fostered mutual dialogue between cultures during the last 30 years, have been replaced with information about autocratic actions. However instead of widening the split, set by the government institutions, our nations continue to struggle maintaining hard work on the background of common heritage. The activities of Polish and Belarusian historians, writers, scientists and translators faithfully serve to popularize the intercultural dialog as a "process of the process of expanding the repertoire of one's culture of reconciling arguments, traditions, one's own truth and that of the Other" (Nikitorowicz, 2016, p. 55). Their work aimed at mutual understanding between our cultures should find support first of all in our hearts and then in our opposition to the tabooing of the topic.

It should be understood that constructing narratives solely through alienation, we imitate phenomena that we would not like to accept. Today, even stronger than before, responsibility for new generations is firmly associated with emphasizing the importance of tolerance, understanding and negotiation.

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