

CONFERENCE CELEBRATING THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN POLAND AND BELGIUM

Polish-Belgian relations are not just about economics or joint membership in European institutions. Rather, they are a story of centuries-old friendship between two nations that cherish freedom. This was the leitmotif of a conference held on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries. The conference took place at the headquarters of the Belgian Ambassador in Poland on 11 April 2019, with Polish Senator Anna Maria Anders in attendance.

The conference was held at the picturesque Mniszchów Palace on Senatorska Street in Warsaw. The building, which was rebuilt many times, housed the Maltese Order Hospital during World War II, and since the 1960s has been the seat of the Belgian Embassy. The conference was organized by Ambassador Luc Jacobs, who has served in this role since September 2018.

On welcoming the guests, the Ambassador stressed how proud he was to be able to hold this conference on such a special occasion as the 100th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Poland and Belgium. He announced that the conference would be multilingual, as is typical for Belgium. The panelists spoke in Polish, English, and French, and guests were provided headphones to listen to interpreting. The official languages of Belgium are Dutch (Flemish), French, and German. Ambassador Jacobs also noted that it was very important for him that the conference was attended by members of the scientific community, in particular from the Institute of Political Studies, Polish Academy of Sciences (PAS).

He then spoke about the events of nearly a century ago between Poland and Belgium, and how relations between the two countries have changed since. On 10 March 1919, at the request of the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Ignacy Jan Paderewski, the Belgian government recognized Poland's independence. This led to the formal establishment of diplomatic relations between the countries, which, as the Ambassador stressed, was in fact just a formalization of the close ties that had already existed between them for centuries. He also mentioned the role that missionaries from the Meuse valley played in the Christianization of Poland.

He spoke about world-renowned Renaissance intellectuals, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, Jan Dantiscus, Jan Zamoyski, and Justus Lipsius. He recalled the influence of Flemish architects on the design of Gdańsk, as well as the November Uprising, which saved Belgium from an armed Russian-Prussian intervention following the anti-government riots, which began at the end of August 1830.

After the Ambassador's introduction, Mirosław Suchoń, Member of the Sejm and Chairman of the Polish-Belgian Parliamentary Group, elaborated further on the key areas of the shared history between the two countries over the past few centuries. He mentioned the Coordination Bureau of the Solidarity Trade Union Abroad in Brussels, the role of General Maczek's 1st Armored Division in liberating Belgium from German occupation, as well as the membership of both countries in the European Union, NATO, and the UN Security Council. He also spoke about economic relations, stressing that 700 Belgian companies now operate in Poland, and expressed hope that Poland's presence on the Belgian market will soon grow.

After the initial speeches, it was time for the scholarly part of the conference, which was hosted by Professor Ryszard Żelichowski from the PAS Institute of Political Studies.

The first to speak was Prof. Małgorzata Gmurczyk-Wrońska from the PAS Institute of History, who spoke about the establishment of diplomatic relations between Belgium and Poland after World War I. She noted that this event coincided with both countries entering a new stage in their respective histories, but it was also a natural next step in the long-standing friendly ties between the nations. Even before formal-



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izing their diplomatic relations, in autumn 1918, the Polish National Committee in Paris informed the Belgian government of the intention to establish a new state and expressed a desire to enter into a partnership. At that time, Belgium was an important partner for Poland, as one of the victorious countries after the war, which also bordered Germany. As Prof. Gmurczyk-Wrońska noted, cooperation was inevitable. Embassies were established in both countries, and a military attaché was appointed in Brussels. These institutions worked closely with the Polish diplomatic mission in France.

In addition to politics, relations between these two countries were important for another reason. There were many Polish immigrants in Belgium at that time. In addition to Germany and France, Belgium was also an important destination for immigrants seeking work. In the nineteenth century, Polish students flocked to Belgian universities. The beginnings of this newly established official diplomatic relationship were greatly influenced by Józef Piłsudski, Ignacy Paderewski, and Belgian Prime Minister Henry Carton de Wiart.

Józef Łaptos, professor emeritus from the Pedagogical University of Kraków, spoke about the development of Polish-Belgian economic cooperation in the 1930s. He noted that what helped these relations was the fact that Belgium was not seen as a power with imperial ambitions. Belgium's investments in Poland were mostly in the arms industry, the energy sector, and transport. Poland, in turn, wanted to increase its exports of agricultural products and coal to Belgium.

As Germany's neighbors, both Belgium and Poland tried to promote peaceful solutions in international

politics. However, after Adolf Hitler took on the role of Chancellor of the Third Reich, Germany left the League of Nations, rejecting the military provisions of the Treaty of Versailles. In 1936 Germany occupied the Rhineland, which from 1919 had been a demilitarized zone. Thus, Germany undermined the two basic security pillars created by Belgian diplomacy, namely the League of Nations and the Locarno Treaties. From Poland's point of view, the political and military alliance with France established in 1921, which gave her a guarantee of security, was also significantly weakened. Consequently, Belgium opted for neutrality. At that time, Poland was following the doctrine of "equal distance" between Berlin and Moscow, while relations with France deteriorated significantly, especially in the face of strong opposition to the draft Eastern Pact that it proposed. All of this led to even closer relations between Poland and Belgium, which was reflected in Minister Józef Beck's visit to Brussels in March 1936. Once the German occupation began, in September 1939 in Poland and in May 1940 in Belgium, the two governments-in-exile in London strengthened their ties even more.

Unfortunately, one of the scheduled speakers, Prof. Idesbald Goddeeris from the Catholic University of Leuven could not make the conference. He was scheduled to talk about Polish-Belgian relations during the Cold War.

During the speeches, archived documents and photos were displayed on the screen, courtesy of the National Digital Archives.

After the formal part of the conference was over, the Ambassador invited guests for a networking cocktail. ■