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# ИСТОРИЯ МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫХ ОТНОШЕНИЙ И ВНЕШНЯЯ ПОЛИТИКА

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## HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AND FOREIGN POLICY

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### BELARUS – LATVIA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND DIFFICULTIES IN BILATERAL COOPERATION (1992–2017)

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The present article is devoted to the analysis of the Belarusian-Latvian relations during the period after the two countries gained independence. The author came to the conclusion that the main obstacle to expanding bilateral cooperation is the opposite of geopolitical aspirations of Minsk and Riga and, as a consequence, a different attitude of the neighbouring countries to the problem of human rights and historical policy. It is unlikely that the existing disagreements can be eliminated in the coming years. However, such advantages as the geographic proximity of the two countries, the cultural and historical proximity of the Belarusians and Latvians are a favourable factor for establishing effective interaction in the economic sphere, contacts at the level of regions and cities. A great capacity for cooperation exists in the Belarusian-Latvian border area. The article contains an attempt to define "points of growth" in bilateral relations, as well as to identify problems that can be eliminated without serious financial costs.

**Key words:** Belarusian-Latvian relations; Belarusian and Latvian foreign policy; diaspora; Euroregions; twin cities; small border movement.

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## БЕЛАРУСЬ – ЛАТВИЯ: ДОСТИЖЕНИЯ И ПРОБЛЕМЫ ДВУСТОРОННЕГО СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА (1992–2017)

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Посвящена анализу белорусско-латвийских отношений на протяжении периода после обретения двумя странами независимости. Сделан вывод о том, что главным препятствием для расширения двустороннего сотрудничества являются серьезные различия в геополитических устремлениях Минска и Риги и, как следствие, различное отношение стран к проблеме прав человека и исторической политике. Отмечено, что имеющиеся разногласия вряд ли могут быть устранены в ближайшие годы, однако такие преимущества, как географическое соседство двух стран, культурная и историческая близость белорусов и латвийцев, служат благоприятными факторами для налаживания эффективного взаимодействия в экономической сфере. Предпринимается попытка определить точки роста в двусторонних отношениях, а также выявить проблемы, которые могут быть устранены без серьезных финансовых вложений.

**Ключевые слова:** белорусско-латвийские отношения; внешняя политика Беларуси и Латвии; диаспора; европеононы; города-партнеры; малое приграничное движение.

If we try to formulate the most general characteristics of the interstate relations between Belarus and Latvia after the establishment of diplomatic relations (7 April 1992), it can be concluded that the quality and level of cooperation between the countries did not fully correspond to the existing capacity for cooperation. The countries with a common border (about 193 kilometers), cultural and historical community, did not demonstrate stable contacts in the most important areas.

The discrepancy between reality and opportunity was especially evident at the political level. This can be confirmed by a number of criteria and data, including the intensity of visits at the high level, the number and level of signed bilateral agreements. Visits to Latvia by the Head of the Belarusian government were paid in 1998, 2001, 2008, 2010 and 2016. In 1994, 1995 and 2009 Belarus accepted the Prime Minister of Latvia. At the same time, the number of Belarusian-Latvian high-level visits was seriously inferior to the intensity of the exchange between official delegations of Latvia with neighbouring and some other countries. Especially if we note that the last (it was also the first) meeting between the Heads of the two states was held in September 1997 on the margins of the multilateral summit in Vilnius. The scale of the legal base within the Belarusian-Latvian cooperation, which consists of 27 interstate and intergovernmental agreements and 16 interagency agreements, is also not impressive [1].

Intensification of contacts at the level of ministers and deputy ministers of foreign affairs of Belarus and Latvia starting from 2014 may be stated as a positive trend. Thus, the Belarusian Minister V. Makei visited Riga (February 2014, July 2016). In 2015 the Foreign Ministers of Belarus and Latvia met again in Minsk and Riga. In July 2017 a visit to Minsk was made by the Latvian Minister E. Rinkēvičs.

Consultations between ministries of foreign affairs at the level of deputy ministers and heads of structural

divisions have become regular. Last Belarusian-Latvian political consultations took place in Riga on 10 April 2017 and touched upon such important topics as pan-European cooperation and the Eastern Partnership, security and interaction within the framework of international organizations, conjugation of European and Eurasian integrations, etc. The Belarusian side was represented at the event by the Deputy Foreign Minister of Belarus Oleg Kravchenko, and Latvian – by the State Secretary of the Ministry Andrejs Pildegovičs.

During visits to neighbouring countries, diplomats often plan events that go beyond the official program. Thus, during the visit to Belarus (27 September 2016), the State Secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia A. Pildegovičs delivered a lecture to the students of the faculty of international relations of Belarusian State University, where he gave an objective and frank assessment of the internal situation in his country, analysed the state and prospects of the Latvian-Belarusian relations. During the visit of the Minister E. Rinkēvičs (July 2017), presentation of the “History of Latvia” written in Belarusian by the Latvian researchers took place [2].

The analysis of political relations as a whole emphasizes the relevance of posed questions: why the capacity of the two neighbouring countries, close to each other not only geographically, is realized only partially? What objective and subjective obstacles significantly impeded cooperation between the two states and nations?

**The opposite of geopolitical aspirations.** An important or even the most important reason for the inhibition of cooperation between the two neighbouring countries was their opposite geopolitical aspirations. Geopolitics dictated the choice of not only the allies and the political and economic model of the state, but also of the value orientations that affect perception of the view of the world. The Latvian society in the late 1980s took a firm course to restore the country's inde-

pendence and early renunciation of the Soviet legacy. The Latvian state and most of its society saw themselves exclusively as part of the military-political and economic integration groups of the West. Already in December 1991 Latvia joined the North Atlantic Cooperation Council. On 2 April 2004, the Latvian flag as of the full member of NATO appeared on the flagstaff at the headquarters of the Organization in Brussels.

In turn, Belarus, after becoming an independent state, widely used the Soviet experience accumulated in the previous decades in the new political conditions. Russia invariably remained its main ally, with which, according to the agreements concluded in December 1999, construction of the Union State began. Minsk actively participated in all the integration processes led by Moscow. On the contrary, relations between Latvia and Russia did not go beyond the cool ones. Under the circumstances, the nature of the Belarusian-Latvian relations was closely dependent on cooperation on the lines West – Russia, Latvia – Russia, Belarus – Russia.

**A different attitude to the problem of human rights and historical policy.** The second important factor – a different approach to the problem of human rights, to the evaluation of historical events and facts – follows from the first circumstance explaining why the political relations between Minsk and Riga did not demonstrate successful dynamics. Opposite assessments of the past were often declared in the two states. This, above all, related to the events of the XX–XXI centuries (World War II, the postwar development of the Soviet republics, the role of the United States in world politics, etc.).

An official interpretation by Latvian authorities of the events of the Second World War provoked the most acute rejection from the part of the leadership of Belarus. Thus, in March 1998, the Belarusian side officially condemned the heroization of the Latvian SS Legion [3, p. 149–150]. In 2012 the Belarusian side represented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed an official outrage about the appearance in the center of the Latvian city of Bauska of a monument to the Latvian SS Legion. The official representative of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry A. Savinykh called this fact “an encroachment on the common European historical values” [4].

The problem of violation of the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Latvia and Estonia was the second most important topic of discord in bilateral relations. In particular, assessment of the situation with the Russian language in the neighbouring country, as well as with the so-called “non-citizens” was contained in the statements of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry in April 1994 and March 1998. In 2013, the Belarusian Foreign Ministry devoted the section of the report “Human Rights Violations in Certain Countries in 2012” to Latvia [5]. In particular, two full pages were allocated to Latvia in a 49-page report. The approach

of the Belarusian Foreign Ministry expressed in the report caused a sharp rejection of the opponents. Thus, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Latvia E. Rinkēvičs noted that Belarus tries to hide its own problems with democracy with its statements on human rights violations in Latvia and a number of other countries [6].

The claims of the official Riga to the Belarusian government were well known. Some of them got scandalous fame. So, the Minister of Defense of Latvia in May 2001 stated that Belarus could act as “the probable enemy of Latvia”. The statement of the high-ranking politician of the neighbouring country caused an immediate protest from the Belarusian Foreign Ministry [7, p. 125]. In 2005 the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia included assistance to democratization of Belarus into the list of the foreign policy priorities of the Latvian state. In March 2006, the Latvian Foreign Minister A. Pabriks at the meeting of the EU Council for General Affairs and External Relations stated that the European Union should not allow access both to the highest officials of Belarus, and also to those journalists who support the Belarusian authorities. On 15 May 2006, he urged the leaders of Latvian universities to consider the possibility of accepting Belarusian students who do not have an opportunity to study in their country because of political convictions.

In 2011, Latvia condemned the conviction of the Belarusian human rights defender A. Bialiatiski, and in 2012 called on Belarus to ensure respect for human rights and conduct democratic elections, as well as to release political prisoners. Diplomatic scandals also happened in the history of relations between the two countries.

At the same time, it should be noted that after the economic crisis in Latvia, which erupted as a result of global economic shocks in 2008, the rhetoric of the official Riga towards Minsk has become more moderate. Pragmatism of the economy required expanding cooperation with Belarus and, as a result, a more constructive dialogue. This trend has not gone unnoticed in the European structures. Thus, the European Council on Foreign Policy in its report on the “Rule of Law, Democracy and Human Rights in the Eastern Neighbourhood” (2013) attributed Latvia, together with Slovakia, to “sloths” among the EU countries in liberalization of the Belarusian policy. The most “active” member states in this direction were Germany, Poland and Sweden [8].

The annual report of the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the results achieved and forthcoming work in the sphere of the country's foreign policy and on the issues of the European Union, published on the website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gives a compact idea of the Belarusian vector of Latvian foreign policy. In particular, almost half of the page is allocated to Belarus in a 37-page document of the Minister for 2016, which is slightly more than in 2015. An active support by the official Riga of “further deepening of relations between

the EU and Belarus” within the framework of the policy of critical interaction with Belarus (implementation of a 29-stage plan) is noted in the report. It is emphasized that as a result of this approach, in February 2016 most of the EU sanctions against Belarus were cancelled. Latvian MFA called border control and supervision, education, science and culture as the most acute spheres in bilateral cooperation between Latvia and Belarus.

Along with the declaration of certain shifts in bilateral relations, Latvia, through its foreign policy department, as in previous years, continued to urge Belarus to undertake further efforts to uphold the norms of democracy and human rights. In order to move along these lines in 2017, Latvia did not commit itself to continue supporting the reform process by transferring Belarus’ experience in organizing democratic elections and introducing Bologna standards into the Belarusian higher education [9].

The above-mentioned approaches of the official authorities of Belarus and Latvia to bilateral ties allow us to conclude that in the short term one should not expect a significant improvement in political interaction. However, this thesis does not in any way mean that the Belarusian-Latvian cooperation has reached its limit. There are many areas of interaction with good prospects for success. This success, in turn, can favourably influence the overall state of interstate relations.

**Factors that positively influence the interaction between Belarus and Latvia.** As noted above, mutual economic interest should be attributed primarily to factors contributing to the strengthening of bilateral relations. One of the most important areas of cooperation between Belarus and Latvia has been and remains the transport and transit sphere. Both countries are interested in optimal and guaranteed export channels to third countries through the seaports of Latvia. This circumstance acquired special relevance for the Baltic country in conditions of the Russian cargo traffic reduction.

Within the framework of the Belarusian-Latvian intergovernmental commission on economic and scientific-technical cooperation, a working group on transport has been established. In addition, meetings of the Belarusian-Latvian Joint Commission on the International Road Transport are held annually (the last meeting was held in May 2016 in Minsk).

Traditionally, Belarusian export cargoes rank second in the total volume of rail transport in Latvia. In 2014, 6.2 million tons of Belarusian goods were transported. In 2015, the volume of traffic increased 1.5 times (10 million tons), and the total cargo traffic between Latvia and Belarus reached 30.8 million tons. In 2016, 15.6 million tons of cargo (including 5.4 million tons of oil products, which accounted for 79 % of all oil cargo transported by Latvian rails) were transported by rail from Belarus to Latvia. Belarusian petroleum products, timber, chemical goods, metal pro-

ducts, food products, and automotive equipment are transported through the Latvian seaports.

The two countries, together with Estonia and Ukraine, are implementing the project of the container block-train ZUBR, connecting the ports of the Baltic and Black Seas along the regular route Tallinn – Riga – Minsk – Odessa / Ilyichevsk. Operators of the train are: BTLC State Enterprise (Belarus), EVR Cargo (Estonia), LDZ Cargo Logistics (Latvia), Center of Transport Service “Liski” (CTS “Liski”) (Ukraine), Calea Ferată din Moldova (State Enterprise “Railway of Moldova”). The train includes wagons with universal and specialized containers, including refrigerated ones. The dispatch and arrival of containers on fitting platforms using ZUBR train technology is possible from all stations of the Belarusian Railways (in 2015 more than 3.4 thousand containers were transported) [10].

The opening of the Representative Office of the Latvian Railway in Minsk (January 2017) was an indicator of the interest in intensifying cooperation in the field of rail transportation. Una Vitola became the head of the representative office of the Latvian Railway in Minsk. She previously was the representative of the Latvian Ministry of Transport in Russia [11].

In the long term, involvement of Belarus into the large-scale Chinese project “One Belt – One Road” will help to increase the attractiveness and expand opportunities for Belarusian-Latvian cooperation in the field of transit.

A set of relations connected to the so-called “low politics”, i. e. relations at the regional and municipal levels, cooperation in the sphere of culture, tourism, interaction of non-governmental organizations of the two states can be included into the list of favourable factors for the development of Belarusian-Latvian cooperation.

**Regional links.** As an inheritance from the USSR, neighbouring states received such an effective form of cooperation as partnership relations between cities and regions. Obviously, these ties were revived in new conditions and in a new format. The interest in comprehensive development of districts and cities inevitably led far-sighted leaders of the local government to search for new resources, and hence – for potentially useful partners in neighbouring countries. Thus, by the mid-2000s twin townships were established by Minsk and Riga, Vitebsk and Daugavpils, Gomel and Liepāja, Baranovichi and Jelgava, Lida and Jēkabpils.

Other cities and regions of Belarus and Latvia actively interacted based on both pragmatic interests and longstanding human neighbourly contacts.

By 2016, about 60 agreements on twinning and partnership relations were signed. Following the example of other countries, the practice of holding general meetings of partner cities was developed. The meetings were held: Novopolotsk (May 2012), Daugavpils (May 2013). The third meeting was held in Orsha in

April 2015. 31 cities of Belarus (71 representatives of local authorities and business circles) and 21 cities of Latvia (63 heads of city and district services, as well as business) took part in it.

The topic "Implementation of mutual interests aimed at improving the quality of life and well-being of the population" was defined as the main problem for discussion. Ambassadors of both countries M. Popkovs and M. Dolgoplova, heads of the Association of Local Authorities and Local Governments of Latvia, deputy chairmen of the regional executive committees of the Belarusian regions attended and spoke at the meeting in Orsha. In addition to the general meetings, the discussions were held within the framework of three sections: "Trade and economic cooperation in the field of the industry", "Implementation of regional partnership projects as a factor of sustainable development and interstate cooperation", "Implementation of projects in education, youth policy and cultural cooperation". A lot of attention was paid to the development of business infrastructure and business contacts.

Representatives of cities and regions of the two countries repeatedly stressed their interest in mutual expansion of contacts, stressed the need to share their work experience. For example, the head of the Valmiera regional Duma, in particular, noted that in Orsha and the Orsha district, as well as in the whole country, "the correct social policy aimed at ensuring the well-being of people, as well as securing young people in local enterprises" is carried out.

The Vitebsk and Latgale regions demonstrated the greatest number of examples of cooperation. During the past 2 years the partner cities of these regions were able to achieve visible results. This was demonstrated in Orsha, where 3 new twinning agreements were signed: Chashniki – Viļaka, Dubrovno – Dagda, Glubokoe – Viļāni. The next meeting of the cities of Belarus and Latvia is planned for 2017 [12].

**Depending on the size of cities, specific forms of interaction were also used. As an example of successful cooperation of small towns, we can cite the cooperation of Verkhnedvinsk and Krāslava.** The regional media widely covers meetings of the leadership of local authorities of the two countries. So, in September 2015 the delegation of Verkhnedvinsk district headed by the chairman of the district executive committee Igor Markovich took part in the celebration of the Day of Krāslava. Belarusians were not only guests, but also active participants of celebratory events. Among the 19 teams from Latvia, Lithuania and Belarus, the Verkhnedvinsk Cheese and Butter Making Plant team performed at streetball competitions. Verkhnedvinsk sportsmen conducted 9 games, 5 of which they won. The team performed in the uniform with the logo of its enterprise. Flags, booklets and other factory promotional attributes were distributed among the participants of the festival.

Verkhnedvinsk residents also did not miss the opportunity to discuss with their Latvian partners the prospects for cooperation in various fields. Participation of the President of Latvia Raimonds Vējonis in the event gave the weight to international contacts [13].

Cooperation between the capital cities is the most impressive. The start of a new period of cooperation between Riga and Minsk was given by the Agreement between the Riga City Council and the Minsk City Executive Committee signed on 29 March 1999. Practice itself prompted the most real forms of cooperation. So, in October 2014 the Days of Minsk were held in Riga, and in May 2016 the Days of Riga – in Minsk. In April 2015 the leaders of the city authorities A. Shorets and N. Ushakov signed a cooperation programme between the Minsk City Executive Committee and the Riga City Council for 2015–2017. According to the signed document, the Latvian and Belarusian capitals have committed to actively develop cooperation in the field of tourism, monument protection, communal services, social policy and medicine, as well as in the field of environmental protection. The Mayor of the Belarusian capital A. Shorets noted that the tourist experience of Riga, as well as the inflow of investments from the neighbouring country is especially interesting for Minsk. The head of Minsk also pointed out the interest of the city authorities in creation and functioning of private kindergartens, development of the historic center of Riga and parking space of the city as a whole [14; 15].

A new and very promising step forward was the success of the joint bid of Minsk and Riga to host the World Hockey Championship in 2021. Initially, Belarus planned to fight for the forum independently, but after the visit of the Latvian delegation to Minsk in November 2016 it was decided to join forces. It became known that the two countries have submitted a joint application for the Ice Hockey World Championship – 2021 on 19 January 2017. Voting for the choice of the hosts of the World Championship – 2021 was held on 19 May 2017 in Cologne at the annual congress of the International Ice Hockey Federation. The bid of Minsk and Riga won against Finland's Tampere and Helsinki, which also claimed to host the tournament. The day before, on 18 May the city-applicants held presentations of their applications. During the general presentation Nile Ushakov promised the guests of the championship democratic prices. For example, the cost of beer is planned to be determined within 2.20 euros for a glass in Riga, and in Minsk – even cheaper. The head of the executive power of Minsk, Andrei Shorets, continued the jocular topic, adding that in the Belarusian capital beer will cost buyers only 1 euro [16].

The parties have repeatedly expressed the hope that preparation and holding of the World Hockey Championship in Belarus and Latvia will intensify the work on creating joint tourism products and routes, improving the automotive infrastructure and roadside

service in order to maximize the use of the tourist potential of the two countries.

**Tourism and human contacts.** In recent years, bilateral cooperation in the field of tourism has started to expand, primarily in the border areas. In particular, in 2014 2348 organized tourists from Latvia visited the Republic of Belarus, in 2015 – 2337 tourists, in 2016 – already 2967 persons (7.8 % of the total number of tourists outside the CIS). Despite modest figures in terms of the number of organized tourists who visited Belarus in 2016, Latvia ceded only to Russia, Ukraine, Poland and Lithuania. It should be noted that in 2016, 216 tourists from Latvia rested in Belarusian agricultural homesteads (a rapidly developing sector of Belarusian tourism services). As for the Belarusian citizens, the statistics of tourist trips to Latvia are as follows: 2014 – 8409 tourists, 2015 – 5463 tourists, 2016 – 3377 tourists [17, p. 27].

A much bigger number of citizens of Belarus and Latvia visited neighbouring countries for reasons other than tourism (business and private visits, small border traffic, etc.). From 2010 to 2015, Belarus was visited by 33 683 310 foreigners, including from Ukraine – 10 278 720, Poland – 3 224 927, Lithuania – 6 099 167, Moldova – 1 432 109, Latvia – 909 570. Thus, in terms of the number of visits to Belarus, Latvian citizens traditionally occupied the fifth place (without accounting Russian citizens) [18].

Despite the geographical proximity of the countries, achievements in the sphere of tourism cannot be called impressive. Although, it should be noted that after the World Hockey Championship in Minsk in 2014, the situation has begun to change for the better. In August 2016 an accord was reached to conclude the agreement on cooperation and partnership between the Information and Tourist Center “Minsk” and the Riga Bureau for the Development of Tourism “Live Riga”.

Within the framework of the promotion of Belarusian tourism services abroad, two photo exhibitions were presented in Latvia – “Belarus Today” by BelTA and “Nesvizh is the heritage of the world culture”, prepared by the administration of the National Historical and Cultural Museum-Reserve “Nesvizh”. A presentation of the possibilities of the National Park “Belovezhskaya Pushcha” was also held with the participation of the management and employees of the park.

In our opinion, the development of event tourism has serious prospects. Visit by the citizens of Latvia of the mentioned above World Hockey Championship in Minsk can be given as a striking example.

Representatives of participating teams (including Latvia), the leadership of the International Ice Hockey Federation, high guests, as well as the fans noted the high level of organization of the Ice Hockey World Championship in Minsk. Games of the World Championship were broadcasted in 120 countries of the world, more than 1 billion spectators watched

the matches. More than 80 thousand foreigners from 46 countries visited the Championship, including more than 31 thousand foreign citizens from countries, with which Belarus has visa relations. Taking advantage of the right of visa-free entry to the Championship, thousands of Latvians visited Belarus.

**Diaspora.** Presence of the Belarusian and, respectively, Latvian diaspora in the neighbouring countries serves an effective link in relations between the two countries. Belarusians of Latvia is the second largest national minority in the country (3.4 percent of the population in early 2016 or 66 thousand people). 2748 Belarusians of Latvia have the citizenship of the Republic of Belarus.

According to the 2009 census, 1549 Latvians by nationality resided in the Republic of Belarus, which was significantly less than according to the 1999 census (2239 people).

The main reason for the existence of a significant Belarusian diaspora in Latvia was a large-scale migration of the rural population to the nearest industrial centers of Latvia throughout the post-war period. Hundreds of boys and girls after completing the school replenished the labour resources of Riga, Daugavpils, other cities of the neighbouring republic. The logic of young Belarusians was well understood then and now – they wanted higher wages and better living conditions. The collapse of the USSR, establishment of new state borders have become a serious drama for many of our fellow countrymen in Latvia.

Currently, there are Belarusian public organizations functioning in Latvia, including “Svitanak” and “Pramen” (Riga), “Uzdym” (Daugavpils), “Spadchyna” (Ventspils), “Zlata” and “Lyanok” (Jelgava), “Mara” (Liepāja), “Susor’e” (Rēzekne), “Spatkanne” (Jēkabpils), “Viaselka” (Kraslava), etc. The main goal of the organizations is popularization of the Belarusian culture, language and traditions, preservation of the national identity of the Belarusians in Latvia.

Some Belarusian organizations are part of the Union of Belarusians of Latvia. Since 1994, the Belarusian-language newspaper “Pramen” has been published by the Union of Belarusians of Latvia. In 2015 the Belarusian cultural and educational society “Uzdym” (Daugavpils) began publishing the eponymous newspaper.

The Republic of Belarus pays special attention to the development and support of the Riga’s main Belarusian school, which since 2011 is named after Y. Kupala. In 2013 a memorial plaque devoted to Y. Kupala made in Belarus was installed on the school building. A museum exposition dedicated to the life and work of the great Belarusian poet, playwright and publicist was opened in the school. In January 2015 the school, where ethnic Belarusians and children of other nationalities are studying, celebrated its 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

The Union of Artists Belarusians of the Baltic States “Mayu Gonar” is actively functioning in Latvia, which

conducts its solo exhibitions, and also participates in various exhibition events.

The Belarusian Information Center operates in the Academic Library of the University of Latvia, which provides literature, legal and tourist information about Belarus, organizes cultural events.

The presence of Latvians in Belarus is less noticeable. Since 1996 the public association "Union of Latvians of the Vitebsk region "Daugava"" (the chairman – Novikova Sandra Karlovna) has been functioning in Belarus. The society operates the Latvian Sunday School, which trains children from 6 to 16 years. The Latvian language, culture and history of Latvia are taught at the school. There are also music and floristic classes functioning for schoolchildren.

**Achievements and problems of the cross-border cooperation.** Historically, the most active contacts are maintained between the border areas. Belarusian-Latvian borderland is not an exception.

Marked areas have similar and specific characteristics. So, the local authorities of the regions and municipalities of the neighbouring countries have different levels of independence: in Latvia there are legislatively stipulated large powers of local self-government bodies, in Belarus there is a more centralized management system – the "power vertical".

Both the northern regions of Belarus and the southern regions of Latvia have experienced a serious population decline in recent decades. Thus, at the beginning of 2016 the population of the Verkhnedvinsk region was a little over 22 thousand people. This is much less than in 1996 (32 074 persons) and even closer to today's 2009 (24 974) [19].

A similar situation happened in the neighbouring Krāslava region of Latvia. In 2017 the population of the region numbered 14 963 inhabitants. This is significantly less than it was in 2014 (16 291) [20].

The issue of population reduction worries not only the power structures of both states, but also ordinary citizens. With great concern they are asking about the future of their native land: who will live and work in the borderland in 10–20–30 years?

It is widely known that the most effective measure for the development of any territory (including the border area), for the preservation and expansion of the population is the creation of attractive jobs, and therefore, new efficient and profitable industries, service enterprises, tourist facilities.

In this vein, one should support optimism of authors of the website of Verkhnedvinsk district executive committee of the Vitebsk region: "The border area provides many opportunities, for example, to attract investment and develop tourism, but no less than responsibilities. Verkhnedvinsk district is the first in Belarus to welcome guests from Latvia and Russia as well as ordinary travelers. The region is the gate to the West and the East" [21].

The advantage of the Belarusian-Latvian border area is a well-developed transport infrastructure. There are rail, road and water arteries connecting Belarus with the Baltic countries and further the Northern Europe. Creation and development of transport corridors is an important condition for the advance development of the territories of the two states.

Another prerequisite for the socio-economic development of the Pridvinsk Belarusian-Latvian borderland is the high quality of the environment, as well as the presence of numerous lakes and rivers, which creates broad opportunities for ecological, agrarian, and event tourism. These advantages are noted by partners.

**Euroregion "Ozerny krai".** Significant capacity for development of the border is contained in the implementation of such an interstate project as the Euroregion "Ozerny krai". This cross-border structure established in 1998 in the city of Krāslava (Latvia) like all the other 186 Euroregions financed mainly by the European Union is a good example of cooperation between the border areas of neighbouring countries.

Unlike direct contacts between districts, enterprises and institutions of the two countries, the format of the Euroregion envisages the inclusion of more than two neighbouring areas into active cooperation. At present, the Euroregion "Ozerny krai" includes 30 members – 15 municipalities from Latvia, 7 municipalities from Lithuania and 8 administrations from Belarus who jointly implement innovative, creative projects.

With the support of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and local and regional associations of local governments, the first strategy of the Euroregion "Ozerny Krai" for 2001–2007 was developed. The second programme for the period from 2008 to 2013 was supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia. The current Programme for 2014–2020 is financed within the framework of the "3<sup>rd</sup> step" project of the Latvia – Lithuania – Belarus cross-border cooperation programme [22].

Undoubted achievements in functioning of the Euroregion include a number of jointly implemented initiatives.

Thus, representatives of the three countries took part in the creation of five cross-border tourist routes within the framework of the international project "Fostering Capacity for Tourism Development in Latgale-Utena-Vitebsk Cross Border Region" (BELLA DVINA 2). As a result of the joint work, maps and descriptions of tourist routes were prepared in Latvian, Russian, Lithuanian and English.

In particular, Verkhnedvinsk district received an opportunity to improve the tourist infrastructure in the form of beach arrangement with the installation of sports and gaming equipment. 24 signs "Sightseeing" and 10 information curbstones with the description of objects near the main tourist attractions were

established. A digital camera, printer, stationery goods were purchased for a tourist information point. Representatives of the district took part in five international exhibitions.

In September 2014 the final conference within the project of the European Union “Culinary service improvement in Latgale and Vitebsk regions, based on culinary heritage concept” (BELLA CUISINE) was held in Krāslava. As a result of the project, more than 50 objects of food and national culinary heritage of 6 districts of Vitebsk region joined the European culinary network, which priorities are popularization of culinary achievements, preservation of national traditions and customs. Training seminars, promotional tours with participation of media and other events were held. Information materials “Route of the culinary heritage in Latgale region and Vitebsk region – tourist map” were published.

In April 2013 another international project within the EU “Healthy Lifestyle Formation in Border Regions of Latvia and Belarus” was launched in the Preil Culture Center (Latvia). The project lasted for 1.5 years. During this time, its participants held six competitions of amateur athletes.

An important initiative implemented in the Euroregion “Ozerny Krai” was the “Neighbour’s road” project aimed at improving the Latvian – Belarus cross-border accessibility through simplified border crossing points, increasing the level of knowledge of local residents about the procedure for crossing the border using a simplified procedure.

It should be mentioned that over the past years partners have accumulated experience of cooperation, identified bottlenecks in the organization of cross-border cooperation. For example, representatives of the Latvian part of the Euroregion leadership identified obstacles to the border crossing, the high cost of telecommunications between the EU and Belarus, and insufficient connection of the rural population to the Internet.

The sides recognized difficulties with the expansion of tourist flows on the territory of the Euroregion. Belarusian partners saw one of the reasons, that the sphere of tourism did not become a priority for state financing, the lion’s share of funds was still received by industry and agriculture of the district and the region.

In connection with the abovementioned, we would like to quote the comment left on the website of Verkhnedvinsk regional newspaper “Dzvinskaya pravda” by one of its readers: “It would be necessary to conduct more work on “Bella Dvina”. Not much an advertised project, but quite interesting one. And if to facilitate visa regime for this project, it would be very good. Unfortunately, this does not depend on us” [23].

Thus, the difficulty of crossing the border between Belarus and the Schengen zone is often referred as the main problem.

**Small border movement.** It should be noted that an attempt to partially solve the problem of facilitating the state border crossing was made by concluding the Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Belarus and the Government of the Latvian Republic on Facilitation of Mutual Travel by Residents of Border Territories of the Republic of Belarus and the Latvian Republic, which was signed in Riga on 23 August 2010 and entered into force on 1 December 2011.

The border territories included settlements and administrative-territorial units adjacent to the Belarusian-Latvian border in the area up to 30 km. There were altogether about 220 000 people, 65 000 out of whom are residents of the Republic of Belarus (about 0.7 % of the total population of the country and 5.4 % of the population of the Vitebsk region) and 166 000 people of the Latvian Republic (8,3 % of the population of the whole country), who fall under this mechanism. Such a significant difference in the population in favour of Latvia can be explained by entry of Daugavpils into the area, the second most popular city in the country (89 thousand people).

Acceptance of applications for permits began on 1 February 2012, and the issuance of documents – on 1 March.

Residents of the border territories of Belarus and Latvia have the right to visit border territories without visas under special permits issued for a period of one to five years at the Consulate General of Belarus in Daugavpils and the Latvian Consulate in Vitebsk. A fee of 20 euros is set for consideration of the application for a permit. Pensioners, persons with disabilities and children under the age of 18 may be exempted from the fee on the basis of reciprocity.

As early as in 2012, 1.6 thousand people used the simplified mechanism in Belarus (according to the number of issued permits), while 9 500 people received permits in the Republic of Latvia. In 2016, only the Consulate General in Daugavpils issued 8.5 thousand permits to residents of Latvia for small border traffic [24]. Statistics show a significant demand for small border movement among the border population, especially from the Latvian side. But the general figures of visiting the border regions remain insignificant.

In our opinion, a not well-thought-out mechanism for regulating visits to the border area of Belarus by foreign citizens should be noted as a deterrent of mobility and tourism. For example, the procedure for issuing a permit to the border area, which is a significant part of Verkhnedvinsk district, is currently quite expensive, it does not involve the use of modern information technologies (online registration and receipt of a pass). Foreigners, including Russian citizens who wish to visit the Verkhnedvinsk region’s border area, from 1 January 2017, should apply in writing to the Polotsk Border Detachment (Polotsk District, Farinovo village) or to the border outposts of “Saveiki”, “Bigosovo” (Verkhnedvinsk district) [25].

Let's hope that the abovementioned difficulties are of a technical nature and will be quickly overcome.

Life confirms that common borders, shared experiences can unite people, contribute to solving social and economic problems of border regions. With a competent approach, the border status can bring serious dividends.

Thus, it can be stated that cooperation between Belarus and Latvia in the period after the establishment

of diplomatic relations developed unevenly. In particular, it concerns interaction in the political sphere. At the same time, the neighbourhood factor of the two countries required that authorities overcome geopolitical contradictions and search for mutually beneficial areas for cooperation. To a large extent, the level of cooperation in recent years has been improved due to the economic interest and the use of the possibilities of "low politics".

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