

Poland-Ireland Relations

PAIS Conference

October 2024

Professors, distinguished guests.

It is a great honour, and great pleasure, to be able to join this conference with you today, in the beautiful city of Krakow.

It is very fitting that we are meeting together this year, when we mark 20 years since Poland's accession into the European Union. Ireland held the Presidency of the European Union at that point, so the ceremony of welcome for Poland and the other nine members took place in Dublin, in the Pheonix park.

Membership of the European Union has transformed Poland. It has also transformed the relations between Ireland and Poland, forever, for the better.

Today I wanted to trace out some of the history of those relations – their deep roots that stretch back centuries, the current state of our relations, and finally, some of the issues we face together for the future.

The earliest connections between Ireland and Poland potentially go back Centuries. Here in Krakow, in the Wawel Cathedral Library, is an illustrated manuscript of 27 sermons dating from the late 8<sup>th</sup> Century. The designs in the book draw from the Celtic-Irish monastic tradition of decorated manuscripts, and are similar to the sorts of designs you might see in the Book of Kells. For Centuries, the book was kept in the Benedictine Monastery of Tyniec, near Krakow, where evidence Celtic influence is being investigated. It is tantalising to think that perhaps over a millennium ago, the travels of Irish monks may have brought them all the way to Poland.

Moving forward several centuries to recorded history, the first history of Polish in the English language was written by an Irishman, Bernard O'Connor. O'Connor was born in Kerry, and spent a year in Warsaw in 1694 as the personal physician to King Jan Sobieski III. O'Connor used his experiences in Warsaw and the many conversations he had to produce a two volume History of Poland, its Ancient and Present States, in 1698.

In 1790, another Irishman, Denis McClair, arrived in Poland at the invitation of Princess Izabela Czartoryska, who wanted to introduce the fashionable English style of gardening to her Polish estates. McClair changed his name to Dionizy Mikler, and went on to design around 50 gardens for the Polish aristocracy, including the Lubomirski, Potocki, Sobanski and Orłowski families.

The next Centuries were difficult and dark times for both Ireland and Poland, as our countries experienced the loss of our independence.

Increasingly, political and revolutionary groups in both countries began to draw inspiration from one another, and their common desire for freedom.

In 1791 the United Irishmen were founded, with a mission to unite Protestants, Catholics and Dissenters behind the cause of Irish liberty. Poland was viewed as an example to be followed. A gathering was held in Belfast in 1792 to celebrate the anniversary of the Constitution of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, while the Northern Star newspaper told its readers “we cannot sufficiently admire the judgement, the ability, the policy, which it displays on every page.”

Tadeusz Kosciuszko’s failed rising of 1794 and the final cruel partition which followed it aroused deep sympathies among the United Irishmen and their leader Wolfe Tone in particular. Kosciuszko’s Rising inspired Wolfe Tone in a Rising in Ireland four years later, in 1798, which suffered a similar fate. In his speech from the dock having been condemned to death, Tone invoked Kosciuszko’s spirit and his call to arms.

There are parallels too, between the Young Ireland and Młoda Polska movements, and the romanticist literature which accompanied each. A poem in the Irish nationalist newspaper, the Nation, at the time of the 1863 Uprising in Poland referred to Ireland as the “Poland of the Seas.”

Around this time in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Ireland suffered its greatest tragedy, the Great Famine. Around 1 million people died, and 1 million were forced to emigrate. One man who did a huge amount to help was Pawel Edmund Strzelecki, born in the small village of Gluszyna near Poznan. At the time of the famine he led efforts to oversee relief, and his actions and fundraising saved thousands of lives. Today, Strzelecki’s remarkable life is better known, and his memory honoured. Last year I took part in a series of commemorations around the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, and was able to share the thanks of the people of Ireland for his work. As I learned more about the life of Strzelecki I realised that given the location where Strzelecki mainly worked in Ireland, in the North West of the country it is entirely possible that my own forebears were among those saved by his work.

As well as politics, and notable individuals, Ireland and Poland have long had mutual influence and engagement in the realm of culture.

In the musical sphere, there is the influence of John Field on Frederic Chopin. Born in Dublin in 1792, Field was considered the greatest pianist of his day. He began composing and gave concerts in Paris, London, Vienna and St. Petersburg. Field became associated with the nocturne, a form that he developed and popularised. Fryderyk Chopin was strongly influenced by the work of Field, who he greatly respected, and particularly admired Field's eighteen nocturnes. Chopin took the nocturne developed by Field and expanded on the form to create a unique sound of his own.

In literature, we should recall the influence of Thomas Moore on Adam Mickiewicz, who translated Moore's *Meeting of the Waters* and said that it was only through Moore's work that he could feel the beauty of the English language. Three of Moore's *Irish Melodies* were translated by another giant of Polish poetry, Juliusz Slowacki.

The Twentieth Century, and World War One, led to profound changes for both Ireland and Poland.

Independence movements in both countries, followed developments across the continent closely, seeking inspiration and example.

Polish newspapers reported on the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, focusing on the parallels with Poland. A focus of their coverage was Countess Constance Markiewicz, wife of a Polish Count and the first Irish woman Parliamentarian and Minister. She remains a symbol of Polish Irish ties, and I was pleased to visit the school named in her honour this St. Patrick's Day in Warsaw.

In the early years of independence, the paths of the Polish and Irish states did not immediately cross.

A Polish Diplomatic presence was established in Dublin in 1929, under Tadeusz Waclaw Dorzynski, as Consul General. In a far cry from today, the Polish community could fit inside a single Dublin church in 1930, for the first official 3 May celebrations in Ireland.

While there was no Irish Embassy in Poland at this time, an Irish diplomat, Sean Lester, would play an important role as League of Nations High Commissioner in Gdansk from 1933 to 1936.

Lester was one of the first to warn of the danger posed by Nazism, and to protest the persecution of the city's Polish and Jewish inhabitants.

During the Second World War, an Irish woman, Eileen Frances Short, served as a nurse with the Kryska Group operating in Czerniakow during the Warsaw Uprising. She survived the uprising and escaped to Britain, where she worked as a translator for the Polish Government in Exile. There is a plaque in her memory at the Field Cathedral of the Polish Army in Warsaw, where the Embassy of Ireland lays a wreath each year on 1 August.

After the war, there were approaches from the Warsaw based government, but Ireland maintained relations with the Government in Exile, and would do so until 1958. For a while there was speculation that the London government might even move to Ireland and unofficial soundings were made.

Ireland also became a temporary home for hundreds of Polish soldiers and Airmen from the Home Army. They came to study at Irish universities at the request of the Government in Exile, the first group arriving in 1946. For the Irish government, it was an opportunity to show solidarity with Poland. A Polish House was established in the city of Cork, where Polish students lived.

Among those to arrive in Ireland at this time was Professor Jan Łukasiewicz, one of the most eminent academics of the 20th century. A leading philosopher and mathematician, he came to Ireland after the Second World War, where he was appointed Professor of Mathematical Logic at the Royal Irish Academy. He remained in Ireland for the rest of his life. He died and was buried in Dublin in 1956. In 2022, his remains were brought back to Poland, and I was honoured to attend a ceremony for his reinternment in Warsaw.

For a while the Polish connection in Ireland thrived, but it proved to be short lived. Most moved on when they finished their studies, finding new lives in Britain and the United States. Few remained in Ireland when the scheme came to an end in 1962.

Formal relations with the government in exile came to an end in March 1958, when the Polish Consulate in Dublin closed. For some years after, there were no formal diplomatic relations between Ireland and Poland.

Ireland did not establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of Poland until 1976, but there was no Irish Embassy in Warsaw or Polish Embassy in Dublin. Contact was limited, with little real engagement between governments.

While there was little formal governmental contact in the 1980s, there was great popular sympathy and interest in Ireland. The Solidarity movement captured the public imagination in Ireland, and there was an outpouring of sympathy and support when martial law was imposed in 1981. Protests were held outside the Soviet Embassy in Dublin, and government and charities provided hundreds of thousands of Euros worth of practical support. Artists and musicians also pledged their support: U2's song "New Year's Day" was dedicated to Lech Walesa, who was interned at the time the song was recorded. If you visit the city of Lodz today you'll find the U2 Gate at the OFF Piotrkowska centre, in honour of this connection.

It was the historic change of 1989 that opened a new era for Poland, and the chance to create a new relationship between Poland and Ireland. The Irish government opened an office in Warsaw in the Autumn on 1989 which became a full Embassy the following year. A Polish Embassy opened in Dublin one year later.

From the outset, Ireland supported Poland's wish to join the European Union. Having benefited from membership ourselves, we firmly believed that the benefits should be extended to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. We hold this same belief today for the candidate countries.

To help Poland prepare for membership, the Irish government began a scheme in 1992 to bring Polish officials to Ireland to work alongside Irish civil servants and learn from our experience of the EU. The scheme ran for sixteen years, with hundreds of Polish officials taking part. Many of them are still working in Poland's government and institutions today.

In May 2004, Ireland was Presidency of the European Union, at the moment when Poland and nine other accession states joined. A special ceremony - the Day of Welcomes was organised in the Pheonix Park in Dublin for the ten new accession states.

Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney prepared a special poem for the occasion, *Beacons at Bealtaine*. Let me read one of the lines: "So on a day when newcomers appear, let it be a homecoming, and let us speak the unstrange word, as it behoves us here, move lips, move minds, and make new meanings flare."

How those new meanings have flared over these past twenty years.

Our common membership of the European Union sets the context for the contemporary relationship between Ireland and Poland. Before accession, Ireland and Poland were friends. On that day of 1 May, we became family.

I will briefly outline three ways in which common membership of the Union has contributed to our relations: politically, economically, and our people to people links.

Politically, Ireland and Poland now work intensively together on all the major issues facing our continent. On every major question: the war in Ukraine, reform of the EU, the economy, climate, migration, international crises, Irish and Polish officials are in contact every day in Brussels, and between our capitals.

We have extensive senior level contact. The Taoiseach, Simon Harris, has visited Poland twice already this year, most recently in September. We had an excellent meeting with Prime

Minister Tusk in Rzeszow, where we discussed a broad range of European and international issues.

As Prime Minister Tusk noted, Ireland and Poland are closely aligned on almost all major issues. We are both firm believers in the single market, in rule of law, and in human rights. We strongly support Ukraine as it faces Russia's brutal aggression, and want to see a future where Ukraine also is a member of the European Union.

Ahead of every European Council, the leaders of Ireland, Poland and the Nordic-Baltic countries get together to discuss and coordinate our positions. This is a powerful symbol of how like-minded we are politically.

We also cooperate together in practical ways on global challenges. For many years, Irish and Polish peacekeepers have served together in a joint battalion in UNIFIL in Lebanon. I want to pay tribute to this battalion for their work, particularly in extremely difficult circumstances at present.

As well as the Taoiseach, three other Ministers have visited this year, to discuss subjects as diverse as our trade links, combatting money-laundering, and migration. We have regular consultations between our Foreign Ministries across the entire European and international agenda.

I want to share with you today that we are preparing for the largest ever Irish government visit to Poland, in just two weeks time.

The Taoiseach will lead a trade mission to Poland, including the Minister for Enterprise, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Minister of State for European Affairs, and the Minister of State for Agriculture. This is only the third time in history that Ireland has sent a whole of government trade mission, and the selection of Poland highlights the importance that Ireland attaches to our relationship.

Ireland and Poland are ever closer economically. At the turn of the Century trade between our countries was around €300 million Euros. By 2022, two way trade had increased to over €7.4 billion, and continues to grow rapidly. In the past two years Minister for Trade Calleary has led successful trade missions to Poland, where Irish companies have seen the huge opportunities for export and investment, including in rapidly expanding areas like cyber security.

Already, dozens of Irish companies are operating with success right across Poland. I've met Irish companies in every field. High tech medical equipment and medical devices, like S3

Connected health in Wroclaw. World class project management from PM Group in Wroclaw and Warsaw. World leading specialist clothing from Portwest in Czeladz.

Here in Krakow, I was honoured last year to officially open the offices of RKD Architects, a company which started in Ireland and which is now operating with great success here. I was also delighted to visit Milkbar Tomasz, a Milkbar run by an Irish man from Dublin, which serves some of the best Irish breakfasts you can get outside Ireland.

Perhaps the most important way in which our relations have strengthened these past twenty years is our people to people links.

In the 1990s, the Polish community in Ireland was extremely small, probably just a few hundred people.

In 2004, Ireland was one of three countries, alongside the United Kingdom and Sweden, to open our labour market to the new accession states. Over the coming years, over 300,000 Polish citizens came to live in Ireland. This had a huge positive impact on Irish society. Virtually every city, town and village in Ireland had a new Polish community, with Polish language spoken on the streets, Polish masses in many churches, and Polish sklep appearing in many towns.

Eleven Polish cities have direct flights to Ireland, with dozens of flights each month. As any of us have travelled on them can attest, these flights are almost invariably full, demonstrating the huge traffic between our countries each month.

I've had the pleasure of meeting many Polish people who have lived and worked in Ireland. All of them told me that they felt welcomed in Ireland, and really felt at home there.

I can honestly say that I feel the same here in Poland. There are certain factors in our history, culture, and character that make it easy for Irish and Polish people to relate to one another. As countries which lost, and then regained our independence, we strongly value our freedom and our democracy. We have a strong attachment to family, and community. We even have similar sense of humour. As a result of these similarities, the integration of the Polish community in Ireland has been a huge success.

The last census recorded around 96,000 Polish people living in Ireland, and Polish remains the third most spoken language in Ireland, after English and Irish. There are more than 50 Polish schools in operation across Ireland, with thousands of pupils.

The Irish community in Poland is much smaller. Estimates are very difficult, but it is probably in the low thousands. Recent years though have seen a boom in the number of Irish students studying in Polish universities. There are over a thousand Irish students this academic year, mainly in veterinary studies and medicine. Their numbers have grown so large that Poland can now support three successful Gaelic Football Clubs – in Warsaw, Wroclaw and Bydgosc.

As well as these permanent residents, thousands of Irish people visit Poland each year. A particularly memorable moment was Euro 2012, when thousands of Irish fans, including myself visited Poznan and Sopot. The football team may have been terrible, but we have fond memories of the beautiful cities, and warm welcome.

There is also what we call the affinity diaspora: tens of thousands of Polish people who have lived or worked in Ireland at some point in the last twenty years, and have since returned home. In the last Polish census, over 10,000 people were listed as having a second Irish passport. Many of these are the children of Polish people who were born in Ireland, but have since returned to Poland.

I've been lucky to meet many Polish people right across the country, who have brought back fond memories and lasting links with Ireland.

This reverse diaspora have a very important role to play in the connections between our countries. Some of these returnees have established new companies, building on the skills and connections they made in Ireland, in areas as diverse as cyber security or pet food. Others have gone into government service or academia. There are also signs that many people in Poland have brought back a taste for Irish products. In 2023 Poland was the second largest market for Irish whiskey, surpassing even Ireland.

Our cultural connections are as strong as they have ever been. I'm delighted to see the huge interest in Irish Literature in Poland, with a huge appetite for translation of the latest works of Irish authors.

In 2022 we launched a new initiative, the Heaney-Milosz Residency. The Residency honours the friendship of two Nobel Laureates – Seamus Heaney and Czeslaw Milosz. During his life, Seamus Heaney made several visits here to Krakow, and developed a close friendship with Czeslaw Milosz. The Residency, organised in partnership with the Krakow Festival Bureau and the Seamus Heaney Estate, allows an Irish writer to spend up to six weeks here in Krakow, in the former apartment of Czeslaw Milosz. In 2023, our first Resident poet was Alice Lyons. The call for applications for the 2025 Residency is now open, and details are on our Embassy website – please spread the word to any interested applicants.

As in many countries, interest in Ireland in Poland peaks around St. Patrick's Day. The Embassy was delighted to receive news from many cities across Poland, and dozens of schools, which were having St. Patrick's Day celebrations. Dozens of Polish people told me how their children had worn green to school for St. Patrick's Day, and enjoyed learning about Ireland and Irish culture. It is wonderful to see how many Polish people are inspired by Irish traditional music and dance.

I would like to pay a particular tribute to all of you gathered here today, for the fantastic work you do to promote Irish culture, history, literature and music, and to build the bonds of understanding and friendship between Ireland and Poland. I'd like to thank the Polish Association of Irish Studies, led by Professor Katarzyna Bazarnik, for the fantastic work you do throughout the year, and for all the efforts that have gone into organising this conference. I'm looking forward to many fascinating lectures and panels over the days ahead.

Let me conclude by turning to the future.

Just a few hundred kilometres from here, Russia is waging a brutal war of aggression against Ukraine.

I want to pay tribute to the people of Ukraine, who have fought with such determination and bravery, and who have suffered so much. I also want to pay tribute to the people of Poland, who responded with such humanity and generosity, welcoming over 1 million Ukrainian refugees.

Perhaps because of our own history of occupation, Ireland also has a natural affinity for Ukraine and its people. Ireland has welcomed over 100,000 Ukrainian refugees, who now make up over 2 per cent of our population. We have contributed over €380 million in humanitarian assistance. We support the strongest possible sanctions against Russia, and full accountability for the crimes committed by Russia. Like Poland, we firmly believe that we must provide Ukraine with all the support it needs to triumph, and that its future lies within the European Union.

Support for Ukraine, and work towards accession for Ukraine and other countries seeking to join the Union, is the most pressing priority. But it is far from the only challenge facing the European Union today.

The global environment today is as challenging as it has been since the end of the Second World War. As well as war in Ukraine, we have a major conflict in the Middle East, and significant challenges to the multilateral system. Ireland and Poland understand the importance of upholding an international rules based order, with respect for international humanitarian law and the rule of law.

We also must address economic challenges. As Mario Draghi set out in his recent report on European competitiveness: “Europe is entering an unprecedented period in its history, where rapid technological change and sectoral transitions will combine with a shrinking working age population.”

The single market in goods has been an enormous success, opening up prosperity and choice for consumers across the Continent. We now want to make similar progress in advancing a single market in services, as well as connecting Europe’s capital markets.

Above all, we have to face the generational challenge of climate change - both dealing with the consequences of the changes which are underway already, as well as urgently striving to develop green policies which will prevent even more catastrophic outcomes for the generations to come.

None of this will be easy. But our best chance of success is working on policies together as a European community, sharing our expertise and resources.

As well as the challenges we face however, I see enormous opportunities.

Twenty years into our relationship in the European Union, the ties between Ireland and Poland have never been stronger, and I believe that they will continue to grow rapidly in the years to come.

Next year, Poland will be President of the European Union, and we look forward to six months of intense collaboration, with plans for over 20 Ministerial meetings in Poland. In 2026, Ireland will be President of the EU, and we hope to build on the progress Poland makes during its tenure.

Economically, our trade and investment links continue to thrive. We hope to bring more Irish companies to the Polish market in the coming years, further strengthening our economic linkages. After two successful trade missions in the past two years, we hope for more in the years ahead.

In culture and people to people links, there is a deep well of potential which can be developed. I'm delighted to see so much interest in Irish culture, history, and literature across Poland, and I look forward to meeting many of you in the days ahead to hear more about the areas you are working on.

If the past of our relationship was written by a very small number of exceptional people, the future of our relationship will have thousands of authors, each with their own story to tell.