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Polish Foreign Policy Toward its Eastern Neighbors: Is a Close Cooperation with Germany Possible?

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Poland's political elite has been often confronted with the dilemma of how to formulate an effective foreign policy that simultaneously pursues state interests and also allows Poland to gain support from major EU member states. Effectiveness is crucial, as Poland has limited influence in Europe due to its still developing economy and relatively short history of formulating an independent foreign policy. This text will examine the main determinants and objectives of Polish foreign policy toward its eastern neighbors, as well as how this policy can be implemented. It will also propose recommendations for Polish decision makers on how to improve Polish and EU policy toward their Eastern partners.

Background

Polish foreign policy toward the post-Soviet countries is determined by two main factors: geographical and cultural proximities on the one side, and Poland's role within the European Union on the other. Poland's location near Russia still causes serious concerns among the Polish elite about their own security, as Russia has significant military potential and its authorities are undemocratic. While Poles were dominated by Russia and the USSR between the 18th and 20th centuries, they have had more positive experiences with their other Eastern neighbors. From the 15th until the end of 18th century they created a Commonwealth (*Rzeczpospolita*) with Lithuania, Ukraine, and Belarus, and it was the most prosperous period of Poland's history. This experience taught many Polish politicians and intellectuals, among them Lech and Jarosław Kaczyński, that it is only with close cooperation with independent Eastern European states that Poland can oppose Russian/Soviet dominance and protect its own sovereignty.

Accession to the European Union in 2004 greatly influenced Polish foreign policy toward its Eastern neighbors. Polish politicians on the left such as Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Leszek Miller were convinced that a strong position for Poland within the EU depended on establishing good relations with all Eastern European countries remaining out-

side the EU, including Russia. They also expected huge financial benefits from economic cooperation with these countries, taking into account Poland's favorable geographical position between East and West, as well as its close cultural and social links with its Eastern neighbors.

After the financial crisis in 2008, both approaches were strongly criticized by some experts close to the Polish government headed by Prime Minister Donald Tusk. They stress that Poland's accession to the European Union meant that its main trade partners are now located in the EU and that Russian, Ukrainian, and other post-Soviet internal markets are less attractive for Polish exporters and investors than previously expected (mainly because of growing corruption and state protectionism).¹ They also criticized the fact that during Lech Kaczyński's presidency, Poland's political self-identification in foreign relations depended too much on its relationship with Eastern European countries. According to these experts, Poland should concentrate on its own modernization and develop close economic and political relations with the largest EU member states.

Objectives

The strategic goal of Polish foreign policy toward post-Soviet countries has been the same since

the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. Poland wants its Eastern neighbors to adopt liberal, democratic, and free market values. In other words, Poland would like to have Western standards in the East, which is the best guarantee of its own security and the establishment of mutually-favorable close economic relations. Poland's success in joining the EU and NATO convinced them that the best motivation for Eastern European countries to adopt Western principles would be to offer them the clear prospect of membership in these institutions.

The Kaczynski brothers' tactical approach was to create a coalition of Eastern European and South Caucasian states aimed at decreasing Russian influence in the post-Soviet area and integrating the region with the West. This approach was set in motion due to the widely-held view that Russia, as a powerful country in the post-Soviet area and a state with a democratic deficit and neo-imperialistic tendencies, had a negative impact on the other post-Soviet countries. According to Kaczyński's policy, limiting Russia's influence in this area should create opportunities for a successful democratic transformation in post-Soviet countries. In effect, this policy caused an overestimation of non-Russian post-Soviet elites' attitudes toward democracy. It also gave Poland an anti-Russian image among many states both inside and outside the EU at a time when most of them are interested in establishing cooperative relations with Moscow.

For Donald Tusk it was clear that Poland needed first of all to improve its anti-Russian image in Europe and to regain its flexibility in formulating foreign policy toward post-Soviet states. The Polish government has thus begun to promote Western standards in a way that does not actively oppose Russia—offering economic integration and free visa movement without focusing too much on prospects for membership. Poland has also started to seek partners in the European Union while the United States is less interested in developing its relations with post-Soviet countries. After the United States cancelled a missile defense project with Polish and Czech components in 2009, Poland remained a strong US ally while at the same time

becoming more active in developing the Common Security and Defense Policy within the EU.

Assessments

Poland's most significant foreign policy achievement regarding post-Soviet countries was the initiation of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program with Sweden, which was launched by the EU as part of the European Neighborhood Policy in 2009. Since that time, however, the Polish government has been less active in searching for partners within the EU for formulating new propositions toward the Eastern neighbors, while responsibility for conducting the EaP is in the hands of the European Commission. It is unclear who Poland's strategic partners for Eastern policy are. Regarding policy toward Russia, Poland tries to be included in Russo-German political dialogues as part of the so-called Kaliningrad Triangle. Poland also develops its policy toward Eastern neighbors together with the Baltic states and countries from the Visegrad group. It seeks to be a leader among the new EU member states and sometimes includes older member states like Sweden.

In Poland's view, a visa-free regime and free trade zone are today the most effective mechanisms for promoting Western values in the EU's neighborhood. Poland is working on a local border traffic agreement with Russia that would extend to the whole Kaliningrad enclave, which would be a great achievement for Polish foreign policy. However, when Poland previously elaborated a similar agreement with Ukraine, the government was not able to include Lviv, a town that plays a very important role in Polish-Ukrainian history as well as in social and cultural relations.

During its current EU presidency, the Polish government is not very engaged in resolving frozen conflicts in the post-Soviet area, which is quite surprising in light of Poland's diplomatic engagement during the Russo-Georgian War in 2008. The Polish position is that resolving the frozen conflicts in Transnistria and the South Caucasus would be pos-

sible only after significantly improving the socio-economic situation there, so it is better to focus on the modernization of these regions and integrating them with the EU. This approach should be seen as quite realistic since the EU has neither the instruments nor the political will to become more engaged in resolving frozen conflicts. On the other hand, such an approach could decrease Poland's position in the post-Soviet area, especially with Germany proposing a new plan for resolving the conflict in Transnistria within the framework of the Meseberg Process.

Poland has tried to enhance the European Commission's abilities regarding energy relations with its Eastern neighbors (for instance, the Polish foreign minister asked the EC to participate in the negotiations on a gas agreement with Russia conducted in 2010), and it supports the liberalization of Europe's energy market. Its activities are also focused on building a well-connected, diversified, and competitive regional energy market with partners from the Višegrad group. For Poland, which depends on energy supplies from Russia (about 60 percent of the natural gas and more than 90 percent of the crude oil consumed in Poland come from Russia), the diversification of energy sources is crucial. Polish authorities therefore pay greater attention to the Baltic Pipeline System 2—which is constructed by Russia and opens the possibility for an increase of Russian crude oil supplies to Poland and Germany via the Baltic Sea at the expense of the Druzhba pipeline—and in trying to extend Odessa-Brody pipeline to the Polish border in order to transfer oil from the Caspian region to Europe. In turn, the new German-Russian Nord Stream gas pipeline no longer poses as big a threat to Polish interests as before, mainly due to an oversupply of gas in Europe caused by the mass production of unconventional gas in the United States, which significantly decreased the attractiveness of Russian gas supplies for EU states. Moreover, the first LNG terminal in Poland, which will be operational starting in

2014, has significantly improved the bargaining position of Polish energy companies vis-a-vis Gazprom.

Thesis

- A Polish-German coalition to formulate the EU's external policy toward its Eastern neighbors would be very difficult to establish. German policy is mainly focused on the special partnership with Russia, while Poland prefers to play an active (and leading) role toward other post-Soviet countries. This separation is not beneficial for Germany, Poland, the European Union or the Eastern partners. Without Germany's participation in the Eastern Partnership, Poland does not have enough power to pursue an active policy within the EU towards these countries. Moreover, the lack of a coherent German and Polish policy toward the Eastern neighbors is perceived not only as a weakness of these two countries, but also of the European Union.
- A Polish-German tandem is only possible if both countries agree to play an equal or at least synergetic role toward the Eastern neighbors. Such an approach would allow other EU member states, especially from Central Europe, to follow a common Polish-German policy toward the Eastern neighbors while limiting the risk of political domination by either Germany or Poland.
- The Polish government should support some changes to Germany's Eastern policy aimed at balancing relations with Russia and with the EU's Eastern partners. These countries still have serious democratic deficits that could have a negative impact on European security. Thus Poland, which successfully transformed from an authoritarian regime to a democracy, should closely cooperate with Germany in increasing the EU's presence in the Eastern Neighborhood, for instance by establishing a European Endowment for Democracy.

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Note

- 1 In 2010 Poland recorded a trade surplus of 11.5 billion euros with the EU member states, which accounted for 79 percent of Polish exports and 59 percent of Polish imports.

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