

Bulletin

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Polish political elites on the future of the European Union

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The current discourse on the European Union and Germany's and Poland's role within its structures, as conducted by the Polish political elites, appears to be driven by a desire to move gradually from a responsive approach to actively contributing to shaping developments. The former approach, dominant in the accession period, involved passively accepting and adopting European Union requirements. The latter, motivated mainly by the eurozone crisis, follows a desire to affect the shape of European integration. Of critical importance here was the shock of seeing the EU edifice, previously perceived as a mainstay of stability protected securely by the German and French coalition, show signs of crumbling. Paradoxically, the inaptness of the “old” Europe in the face of the eurozone crisis, the diversity of assessments and forecasts, delayed decisions and divergent ideas for further integration, have all come together to cure the Polish political elites of its inferiority complexes and encourage them to become more conceptually active. This has naturally resulted in views growing ever farther apart amidst intense political wrangling between the Civic Platform and Law and Justice. Contrary to what was seen in the past, the consensus on European affairs and the overall foreign policy became increasingly tricky to achieve. Even with a common starting point, which is shared approval for Poland's membership in the European Union, relatively convergent views on the country's current position and mutual agreement on what actions need to be taken, differences in the way of thinking run deep.

Both parties believe they are capable of realistically assessing the European Union as a forum for common actions and a focal place of conflict among the nation states. As a structural attribute, the latter has been stressed stronger by politicians associated in the Law and Justice party. This is well illustrated by the following conclusion formulated by Witold Waszczykowski: “The crisis has shown that the European Union is an arena in which the national interests of its member states vie against one another” [March 20, 2013, the Polish Parliament]. Minister Radosław Sikorski has also stressed that “in today's Europe, one needs to fight tooth and nail to defend one's interests” [March 29, 2012, the Polish Parliament]. On another occasion, Mr. Sikorski stated that “the crisis brought out national egoisms. Unfortunately, Community interests often take a back seat to domestic policy” [March 20 2013, the Polish Parliament]. Particularly criticized is the tendency to break up the Union into a central core and peripheral regions along the lines of eurozone membership and non-membership. Prime Minister Donald Tusk has said: “There is no greater danger for Poland today than the surreptitious dismantling of Europe with little attention paid to countries outside of the eurozone, the eurozone being focused on repairing itself and losing sight of the EU of twenty seven”. He continued to note the dramatic choice between either saving the European Union or allowing “a dictatorship of one, two, three or four capitals” and even returning to “an archaic but still very robust model of an alliance of powers or, as some fear,



a single superpower". The point, therefore, is for decisions to "emanate from the whole Community and Europe rather than resulting from bartering and wrestling among the largest actors within the European Union" [December 15, 2011, the Polish Parliament].

In principle, both the government and the opposition reject the prospect of a federal Europe. Minister Sikorski has said: "I avoid using the term 'federalism' as people associate it with irreversibly surrendering sovereignty to the Community, which is something hardly anyone wants" ["Unia będzie unikalna" ("The Union will be unique"), interview with Radosław Sikorski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 18, 2012]. On another occasion, the Minister said: "We don't want to see a uniform bureaucratic superstate managed by elites of impersonal Eurocrats operating in isolation"; "We assume that the member states will always be autonomous, entitled to leave the Union at will and choose which powers they will surrender to the Community. I believe that identity, culture, religious beliefs, lifestyles and key tax rates should always remain in the hands of nation states" [March 29, 2012, the Polish Parliament]. Meanwhile, the goal is to "deepen integration and establish a lasting political union" by strengthening community institutions and extending their democratic control. Sikorski has clearly expressed his preference for the community method over the intergovernmental method. "We support strengthening the community method as well as democracy by merging the offices of the Presidents of the European Commission and the Council and having its holder chosen by the European Parliament or in a general election. Some MEPs should be elected from a pan-European ballot" [March 29, 2012]. Obviously, putting this proposal into practice would require a revision of the Treaty on European Union, which is unlikely to happen. Hence, the proposals appear to be very premature declarations of support for Europe.

The Law and Justice party strongly rejects the ideas of EU centralism, a European superstate and federal Europe. Krzysztof Szczerski warned that "power in the federation will go with wealth and size" creating a system stacked strongly against smaller states ["Siadajmy do gry z własnymi atutami" ("Playing to our strengths"), interview with Krzysztof Szczerski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 25, 2012]. According to Krzysztof Szczerski, the ideal is a model of solidarity-based cooperation among national states with a fairly strong preference for the inter-governmental method. All this on the significant presumption that all states are treated as equal rather than some being distinguished over others: "(...) our ideal is a Union of equal states subject to no hierarchy arrangements". This will usher in various forms of cooperation among the members, respect for the principle of solidarity and a lasting commonwealth. The Union should seek to release its social energy and, to that end, opt for "deregulation rather than successive sanctions, prohibitions and dictates", abandon "integration or centralization and, instead, aspire to more freedom and solidarity throughout



Europe”; “The Union today needs a charter of European freedoms which will again unleash the energy of the citizens of its member states which it must not stifle”. This does not mean that the community institutions established to respect such rules should be questioned. The European Commission should not be a tool for “disciplining the weaker and having them subjugated by the strongest but rather for ensuring equal rights and obligations across the Union and enforcing the principle of equality for all”. The only admissible mainstay of democracy are national states: “(...) only the member states are in a position to truly secure democracy as it is only at their level that true citizens exist; to think otherwise is to succumb to utopia and pipedreams” [December 15, 2011, the Polish Parliament].

What distinguishes Civic Platform is its explicit determination to join the eurozone which it sees as the control center of the European Union. As noted by Minister Sikorski: “We intend to meet all convergence criteria and become fully prepared for adopting the euro by 2015. It is in Poland's vital political interest to join the innermost circle of integration made up of the countries which share the common currency” [March 29, 2012, the Polish Parliament]. According to the Minister, this will allow Poland to avoid being marginalized and may even substantially boost its position. “Remaining outside of the joint currency area would limit our room for maneuver. Our options, therefore, are to either remain in the economic, financial and political mainstream or fall by the wayside and miss opportunities to achieve accelerated growth and influence EU policies”. “The turbulence in the south of Europe and the insular remoteness selected by the United Kingdom offer a window of opportunity to join the innermost circle of the European Union's decision-makers. Although we have already become a member state of major significance, we should be prepared to accede to the eurozone to further increase our importance”. “Make no mistake: eurozone accession is in Poland's best strategic interest. Poland has an opportunity to entrench itself geopolitically for decades to come and perhaps, I would like to think, even for centuries” [March 20, 2013, the Polish Parliament]. The government applauds as success Poland's achievement of the pre-in status which positions it in between eurozone members on the one hand and the countries which have no intention of adopting the currency on the other. Its policy has been described as “putting a foot in the door”.

While Law & Justice does not rule out adopting the common currency, the party only admits the option on the condition that the eurozone regains stability, Poland meets the prescribed economic criteria, the currency is shown to clearly serve Poland's economy and society and, naturally, that eurozone accession is approved in a referendum. What is more, the party rejects the political arguments for the immediate accession to the eurozone and proposes alternatives for strengthening Poland's position in the Union. Witold Waszczykowski sees the dilemma between joining the eurozone and Poland's



marginalization as a fallacy. He demonstrates, among others, that the euro has not only failed to boost Estonia's standing but also that its rejection did nothing to weaken the United Kingdom: "(...) it is not true that our rejection of the euro will eliminate us from the European debate and deprive us of influence in decisions of vital importance for Poland's interests (...). Poland may enhance its position by again becoming a spokesman for other states in the region and by restoring a tight and genuine cooperation in regional projects with Nordic and Balkan states as well as the Visegrad Group and Romania" [March 20, 2013, the Polish Parliament]. In a similar vein, Krzysztof Szczerski said: "Poland derives its strength from the power of Central and Eastern Europe and applies it to strengthen the entire continent" [March 29, 2012, the Polish Parliament]. On another occasion, he said: "Poland is vitally interested in supporting all processes that preserve the Union. It should not yield to the temptation of joining the pioneers at the expense of regional bonds" ["Siadajmy do gry z własnymi atutami" ("Playing to our strengths"), interview with Krzysztof Szczerski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 25, 2012]. The adoption of a common currency is not included among the foreign policy priorities of the Law and Justice party.

The government and the opposition agree that Poland should look for allies within the Union. They are strongly divided, however, on the issue of Polish-German cooperation. Speaking on such cooperation, Minister Sikorski has noted favorable conditions for Poland and Germany and the fact that two countries share a vision on the future of the Union. He argues that although Germany may be "the largest shareholder in the European Union", it nevertheless falls short of becoming "a controlling partner", which is why it still needs allies: "(...) while it is difficult to accomplish anything in the Union against Germany's will, Germany nevertheless requires more than one partner to meet its goals. When a project is at risk, this largest shareholder carries the biggest responsibility but also has the greatest potential to save the day. We want to work together for a strong Union. As I have told my German friends in a Berlin speech: if you include us in the decision-making, you can count on Poland's support" [March 29, 2012, the Polish Parliament]. And another quote: "Poland and Germany share a vision of the future of Europe and ideas for overcoming the crisis. We join forces to care for our neighborhood, particularly in the east. We also persistently remind our partners that even a state as powerful as Germany cannot go it alone in the European Union. Power should always come with responsibility for the fate of Europe" [March 20, 2013, the Polish Parliament]. In the above-mentioned Berlin speech, Minister Sikorski appealed to Germany (on November 28, 2011) to assume leadership. Poland's interpretation was that he called on Germans to take on financial burdens.

The Minister's speech did indeed include the two equally important aspects of criticizing German policies and recognizing Germany's leadership. Sikorski said: "(...) we call



upon Germany to openly accept being the biggest beneficiary in the current arrangements and therefore under the biggest obligation to sustain them (...) You are well aware that you are not just an innocent victim of other people's profligacy. You too have violated the Stability and Growth Pact, your banks too have recklessly bought risky bonds (...) I fear German power less than I am beginning to fear German inaction (...). You must not fail to lead. Rather than dominate, you must spearhead reform. If included in the decision-making, Poland will support you". The Minister explained later: "I have criticized Germany for being insufficiently committed to saving the eurozone of which it is the biggest beneficiary. I said I feared Germany's power less than I feared Germany's inaction". Prime Minister Tusk also explained that the Berlin speech was to "prod all partners, including the European Union's largest state of Germany, to stop pretending they are not fully responsible for the crisis" [December 15, 2011, the Polish Parliament]. In a similar vein, Minister Sikorski said: "I think it was more about Germany's reluctance to give away its credit card. Germany's power would be much easier to swallow if followed up by unconditional sharing of money. Needless to say, there is a limit to how much pressure one can put on the countries which have delayed reform for decades. Berlin's pressure to adopt austerity measures and carry out reforms is understandable but, if too big, it will stifle economic growth and prevent such countries from ever repaying their debts" ["Unia będzie unikalna" ("The Union will be unique"), interview with Radosław Sikorski, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 18, 2012; Minister Sikorski opted for euro-bonds, certainly to Germany's dislike, cf. interview "Wir wollen keinen Kalten Krieg" ("No to cold wars"), *Die Zeit*, November 26, 2013].

There is a fundamental consensus on Poland needing to defend the status quo in its relations with both the European Union and the North Atlantic Alliance. The aim in the case of NATO is to ensure that art. 5 remains in full effect and to reverse the trend of the Alliance being turned into a collective political security system. As for the EU, the purpose is to at least prevent internal divisions, uphold the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity and possibly tighten the Common Security and Defense Policy. Clearly the idea is to crawl into a cocoon of security and stability. There is one aspect, however, in which Poland acts as a revisionist seeking to change the status quo by enlarging the European Union and NATO eastward (to strengthen the buffer zone separating it from Russia and incorporate its eastern neighbors into the western sphere of influence). The government and the opposition differ on some of the related points although the differences of opinion are much greater between Poland and the main players, i.e. the EU and NATO. The "old" Europe perceives Poland, which aspires to sway both of these organizations to extend their influence to the east, as a trouble-maker which puts spokes in the wheel of their partnership with Russia. The government claims that, of all issues, this is one on which it has made every possible effort,



including the launching of the Eastern Partnership in 2009. The opposition maintain that more could have been done, especially for Ukraine which should have been offered a clear prospect of European Union membership [December 12, 2013 debate in the Polish Parliament].

As a matter of fact, other than the racket emanating from political power struggles, discrepancies between the government and the opposition boil down to differences of opinion on Poland's powers in the international arena. First and foremost, the Law and Justice party has been placing considerably more emphasis on Poland's sovereignty and autonomy as well as “the national interest” or “raison d'état” and “tough policies” whereas the Civic Platform plays these down highlighting the need to enter the mainstream of European discourse and the ability to engage in dialogue and forge compromises. The Civic Platform's rhetoric resonates much better with the predominant tone of the European Union than that of Law and Justice, a party commonly placed towards the “Eurosceptic” end of the political spectrum. The parties agree on Poland having to conduct an active policy on the EU and NATO. Their agreement ends on how to employ the existing potential and diplomatic tools to that end. The government (Civic Platform) claims that Poland has already become a vital player, especially within the European Union, whereas the opposition (Law and Justice) believe that Poland's voice still amounts to very little and that, in fact, it has backslid in its standing. Minister Sikorski appeals for “assessing our powers and opportunities with a cool head”. Krzysztof Szczerski, Member of Parliament, blames him for being “a realist but one from a weak state” and a pursuer of “acquiescent realism”. The fact of the matter is that Minister Sikorski's aspirations are not all that minimalist. Here is a man capable of saying: “I see Poland ‘among the powerful’, joining the five to six countries whose consent is required for any decision in the Union” [“Nic o Polsce bez Polski” (“Nothing About Poland Without Poland”), interview with Minister Radosław Sikorski, *Gazeta Wyborcza* May 18-19, 2013].

The theses included in this text express the opinions of the author only.

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