



Poland's Western Integration and its Eastern Policy

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It seems to be a widespread view both in Brussels and Washington that Poland is going to play a key shaping role in developing NATO's and the EU's policies vis-à-vis the former Soviet republics. It is often argued that due to its geographical location, its history and linguistic kinship, Poland is ideally located to act as a vehicle for reforms and a bridge between the East and the West. However, there are some considerable obstacles before Poland can meet these expectations, of which the most important are historical reasons and – ironically – Poland's strong westward orientation.

Poland and Russia

Although Poland traditionally has been strongly involved in its neighbouring areas to the East, the history of this engagement has not been exclusively harmonious. From the 17th century onwards the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth was in constant conflict with the Russian empire over the division of influence in the lands 'in-between' (Ukraine and Belarus), which ended in the defeat and collapse of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth at the end of the 18th century. Although the Polish-Lithuanian state subsequently was divided between its neighbours and ceased to exist, the Polish gentry retained a dominant economic position in the eastern areas; Ukraine, Belarus and Lithuania, which solidified anti-Polish sentiments within these nations. The Second Polish Republic, which came into being in 1918, was a highly heterogeneous entity with a large non-Polish population in its eastern provinces, in particular Ukrainians, Lithuanians and Belarussians, all of whom were subjected to the policy of forced assimilation leading to the further growth of anti-Polish sentiments amongst these nations. The anti-Polish traits of eastern-Slavic and Lithuanian national movements were still present after the end of the Cold War and were evident in the dispute over

the status of the Polish minority in Lithuania and the discussions about reconciliation with Ukraine.

It is therefore clear that when acting in the East, Poland must be cautious not to tread on anybody's toes and in particular not to give the impression that it is projecting its own self-interest through NATO and the EU. It appears that after the initial post-Cold War period, which was marked by some nationalistic overtures from both sides, Warsaw has been on track to establishing a genuine partnership with Lithuania and – with lesser success – with Ukraine. Most importantly, Warsaw served as an advocate of these states' closer ties with the West in both cases. For example, Poland became a strong supporter of Lithuania's NATO membership.² Warsaw has also supported Ukraine's closer ties with the EU and its inclusion in various Central European institutions, such as the Central European Initiative, Central European Free Trade Area (CEFTA) and the regular meetings of Central European Presidents.³

However, although Poland's eastern policy has been relatively successful in Lithuania and Ukraine (with qualifications discussed below), the same is not true for Russia and



Belarus. As far as Belarus is concerned the dictatorial rule of the country's eccentric president Lukashenko and his evident nostalgia for the Soviet Union has served as a major barrier to Warsaw playing an active role in this country. However, this explanation cannot account for why Polish-Russian relations have suffered since the end of the Cold War. Warsaw does not carry all the blame for the current ambivalence in its relations with Moscow. In the eyes of Poles, as well as other Central Europeans, Russia has been very slow and reluctant about coming to terms with the past and acknowledging its historical wrongdoing towards its neighbours. In addition, contemporary Russia's constant meddling in the internal affairs of what it once described as its 'near abroad' and particularly in Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova has been seen in Warsaw as further proof of Russian imperial ambitions in Eastern Europe. All of these factors affected the Polish elite's ability to set aside historical arguments and start perceiving Russia as a potential partner rather than an un-reconstructed bully and a threat. It is in this context that Warsaw's occasional over-sensitivity and clumsiness in its relations with Moscow needs to be seen. The most noteworthy example is probably the expulsion from Poland of nine Russian diplomats who were accused of spying in January 2000.⁴

This continuing lack of trust in Polish-Russian relations has had a significant impact on Polish security and defence policy, which continues to be grounded in the primacy of territorial defence. The state of Poland's relations with Russia is therefore of direct importance for the organisation of its defence (including the practice of conscription) and, as a consequence, for Poland's political and military position in NATO and the EU. While Warsaw hardly can be held accountable alone for this state of affairs, it is also true that there is an urgent need to re-examine the perception in Poland as a potential aggressor. Not only is such a perception increasingly seen as anachronistic in the West, particularly in the aftermath of September 11th, but it also affects Poland's ability to embark on a comprehensive review of its security and defence policies and play a more constructive role in the region.

Warsaw increasingly recognises that its importance and respect in the West are directly linked to its relations with the East and with Russia in particular. It is arguably in this context that Warsaw intensified its efforts to improve relations with Moscow following the events of September 11th, a task which was aided by the pro-western shift in Russian foreign policy under President Putin. It is not insignificant that Polish-Russian relations were discussed during Polish Prime Minister Leszek Miller's visit to Washington in January 2002.⁵ The subsequent visit of Russian President Vladimir Putin to Warsaw demonstrated that Russian attitudes towards Poland are changing for the better.⁶ All of this indicates that Poland and Russia seem to be approaching a much-delayed improvement in their relations. However, it is clear that there is still a long way to go before historical sensitivities no longer obstruct Poland's ability to play a more important role in the region. Another issue with similar implications for Poland as a regional actor is the growing domestic and international incompatibility between Poland and its immediate neighbours to the East: Belarus and Ukraine.

Poland's Westernisation versus its Eastern Vocation

As argued above, Poland's influence in Belarus has been limited since Lukashenko became President and embarked on a policy of preserving the remnants of the Soviet system within Belarus. However, with the emergence of an independent Ukraine hopes ran high both in Kiev and Warsaw for the establishment of a genuine partnership between these countries. Poland was keen to offer Ukraine its help (often sponsored by the US) to aid its integration with the West, assistance which Kiev willingly accepted. When the prospect of NATO membership for Poland came on to the horizon in 1994, Warsaw's policy towards Ukraine intensified as Washington made it clear that any evidence of Poland's regional role would strengthen its application to join the Alliance.⁷

Since the late 1990s however, Poland's engagement in Ukraine has suffered as a result of the increasingly divergent paths of development in the two countries. Poland joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004.



Ukraine's relations with these institutions remain distant and there is no indication that this will change for the foreseeable future. In addition, Poland's role as a bridge between Ukraine and the West has been severely hampered after Poland imposed visa and other travel restrictions for Ukrainians in 2003 following EU requirements. These negative trends have been reinforced by other recent developments, which have seen Ukraine slipping into semi-dictatorship and its economic transition stunted. In contrast, Poland's transitions to democracy and market economy, though incomplete, are irreversible.

This growing domestic incompatibility between Kiev and Warsaw proved itself to be harmful for Poland's engagement in Ukraine. In September 2000 the Ukrainian President Kuchma was accused by his former bodyguard Major Melnychenko of plotting political assassinations as well as breaking the terms of the UN embargo and selling Ukrainian arms to Iraq. Kiev never convincingly denied these allegations with the result being that American aid to Ukraine was frozen. Consequently, Poland has been faced with the dilemma of either cutting its relations with Kiev (and by implication undermining its regional role) or to continue courting Kuchma but risking a rift in its relations with the US. Eventually, possibly following consultations with Washington, Poland took upon itself the role of facilitator between the Kuchma regime and the Ukrainian opposition, hoping for a peaceful change of guard in Kiev. To this end a conference called 'Ukraine in Europe' was organised in Warsaw in October 2002, which brought together the Ukrainian government and opposition as well as the High Representative of the EU, Javier Solana. Whilst this conference confirmed Poland's centrality to the westernisation of its eastern neighbour, it is clear that Poland's ability to exercise its regional role towards Ukraine will be limited as long as the latter does not itself embrace western principles.

Conclusion and Outlook

The area east of Poland is far from homogeneous and it is clear that with time it will only diversify further, both economically and politically. Responding to this process,

Poland's eastern policy is becoming less regional and more bilateral, often based on a series of case-by-case approaches. Of the four neighbours (Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, Lithuania) bordering Poland, it is undoubtedly the relationship with Lithuania that is the best developed and most 'normalised'. The two nations have a joint history as a Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth – the state that dominated most of Eastern Europe between the early 16th and mid-18th century. This common past is remembered in a more positive way in Poland than in Lithuania, where the view prevails that the latter was the commonwealth's junior partner. However, there is a growing appreciation both in Vilnius and Warsaw that in their formative years the two nations were linked by multiple ties as one political unit. Perhaps even more importantly, with EU enlargement in May 2004 and Lithuania's NATO membership in the same year, the two states will operate in the same Euro-Atlantic institutional context.

The three major issues requiring further co-operation between Vilnius and Warsaw are: the future of the Kaliningrad enclave, diversification of energy supplies and the question of minorities. Due to geography, both Poland and Lithuania have joint interests in stabilising the Kaliningrad area and developing its political and economic links with the EU. Moreover, the two countries are likely to co-operate over altering their dependence on energy supplies from Russia, for example by co-operating on buying gas from Norway. Finally, the issue that is likely to remain problematic for Polish-Lithuanian relations and therefore requires further attention from the two governments is the question of the Polish minority in Lithuania and of the Lithuanian minority in Poland. Due to their joint but also sometimes antagonistic history the minority questions continue to be thorny issues and are frequently exploited by nationalistic parties in the two countries. There is, however, a manifest will on the part of the two government to deal with these questions in an amicable and co-operative way.

As argued above, Poland's relations with Ukraine are fairly good but they require a very different approach than its relations

with Lithuania. The two countries are increasingly incompatible in domestic political and economic terms and Ukraine is unlikely to become a full participant in the Euro-Atlantic structures in the near future. Poland is strongly engaged in the westernising process in Ukraine and its independence. However, at least since the late 1990s it appears that Kiev is moving towards semi-dictatorship, drifting away from Europe and strengthening its ties with Russia. Therefore, the cultural and political gap between the two countries is growing, which will affect the bilateral relationship. Considering these circumstances the top priority in Warsaw's relations with Kiev is to maintain Ukraine's remaining ties with the west and reduce its dependence on Russia. As in the case of Lithuania, an essential issue to this is the question of energy supplies. Recently the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding for the construction of a pipeline transporting oil from the Caspian Sea to Poland and further west. If successful, this project would weaken Poland's dependence on Russian oil and it would provide Ukraine with much needed revenues. However, it remains open to question whether this project will ever be implemented. Even more uncertain is the future of democracy in Ukraine - the issue which remains central to further co-operation between these neighbours.

As regards Polish-Russian relations, these remain poisoned by unresolved issues of the past. As long as Russia is not willing to acknowledge its responsibility for the Stalinist rule it imposed on Poland and other Central and East European nations, the relationship will remain burdened by mutual mistrust. Despite these historical and political issues it is however clear that Poland and Russia are bound to develop their economic co-operation, particularly in the light of Poland's EU membership. The relationship with Belarus will continue to depend on the internal developments in this country. In its official policy towards Minsk, Warsaw has kept some distance from the EU's policy aimed at isolating the Belarusian

government. Unofficially, Warsaw continues to support the anti-Lukashenko opposition and the Belarusian national movement.

To conclude, Poland has not got *one* Eastern policy but at least four, each driven by different considerations and issues. The key issues for these relations in the near future are questions of economic co-operation, predominantly energy supply, political reforms in Ukraine and Belarus and the historical process of reconciliation with all of Poland's eastern neighbours.

(Endnotes)

¹ This brief is based on my contribution to the following article: Marcin Zaborowski and Kerry Longhurst, *International Affairs*, October 2003.

² For example, see a speech by President Kwasniewski given during George W. Bush's visit in Warsaw: 'Wystapienie prezydenta Aleksandra Kwasniewskiego', *Rzeczpospolita*, 16.06.2001.

³ See: 'Poland: Eastern Relations', *Oxford Analytica-East Europe Daily Brief*, August 8, 2000.

⁴ See: 'Dyplomaci rosyjscy szpiegami', *Rzeczpospolita*, 21. 01.2000.

⁵ See: 'Miller u Busha', *Trybuna*, 12.01.2002.

⁶ See: 'Gesty rosyjskiego prezydenta', *Rzeczpospolita*, 17.01.2001. 'Dobra atmosfera, malo konkretow', *Rzeczpospolita*, 18.01.2001.

⁷ Roman Wolczuk, 'Polish-Ukrainian Relations: A Strategic Partnership Conditioned by Externalities' in *Defence Studies* Vol2, No.2, pp. 143-150.

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