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Polish Eastern Policy

Report

Warsaw, September 2019



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This report has been co-financed by the European Commission Representation in Poland. The European Commission, or any person acting on its behalf, is not responsible for the use of the information contained in this report. This report reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein

Introduction

Ever since Poland became a member of EU and NATO, the term „Polish Eastern policy” seems less useful than it used to be. Eastern policy, seen in Poland as policy towards former USSR countries, became one of the aspects of foreign policy as a whole. Trying to think of Eastern policy separately from our activity in EU and NATO leads nowhere and is inefficient, as proved by mostly unsuccessful attempts to revive it during Lech Kaczynski’s presidency.

That doesn’t mean that Poland shouldn’t have a policy towards its Eastern partners. However this policy must be a part of a wider foreign policy project, which current government doesn’t seem to have. Therefore current Eastern policy remains reactive and dictated by internal policy and electoral campaigns’ demands. This report aims to present directions for future Polish governments and start a debate to reach internal consensus on foreign policy goals, regardless of elections results.

The question of Russia

Poland’s policy towards Russia is vastly reactive and held hostage by the wreckage remaining in Smolensk since the tragic catastrophe in April 2010. Aggressive anti-Russian rhetoric intended mainly for domestic audience is mixed with inaction and plays right into the dreams of Kremlin’s strategists.

In the past strength of Polish democratic opposition and later first democratic governments laid in their strong formal and informal ties to their Russian counterparts. People to people contacts as well as understanding of Russians’ thinking were one of the most valuable assets we brought to the EU and NATO. Polish government’s senseless decision to stop local border traffic with Kaliningrad region, lack of long term youth exchange programs, teaching Russian and cooperation between universities holds up those kind of people to people contacts. Poland’s position as a point of contact with Russian civil society in the EU was taken by Lithuania.

Issues like Crimea, Georgia, war in Ukraine and aggressive Russian policy in the Baltic region make a real reset in Polish-Russian relationship impossible. But the new government

should make it absolutely clear that our policy is a quarrel with Russian government, not with Russian society.

Poland should be ready to take part in EU and NATO's dialogue with Russia. Attitude of an offended child, who opposes everything, should be replaced by active support of our vision for relations between Russia and the West. New government must define red lines, which Europe shouldn't cross in relations with Russia, which will only be possible through extensive analytical work to predict scenarios for the future of Russia.

Our medium-term goals must be combined with goals of EU and NATO. Even a consistent idea for Poland's strategy won't be successful if we don't manage to convince our allies to support it. We should methodically map key interests of our partners towards Russia. We intuitively feel that we have common interests with Germany and the US and different interests from Southern European countries. However we should base our information on knowledge rather than intuition as Russia is conducting a well-planned policy of building economic influence and creating joint political interests with Western countries.

In the medium-term perspective the key event seems to be a shift of the United States' position from importer to exporter of energy. Due to that shift, US will be less interested in the Middle East and could likely find many common interests with Russia. On the other hand Europe, like China, will become one of the energy recipients. Polish Eastern policy must take into account potential reversal of alliances, even if it seems unlikely from current perspective due to democratic deficit in China and both China and EU's dependence on export.

The question of US – Russia relationship is essential for our security policy. Ever since the war in Georgia, Russian Federation uses military as a basic policy tool, including in Europe. That changes existing security paradigm. Putin's Russia is using military conflict for internal stabilisation and building authorities' popularity. Unfavourable pools suggest another "short, victorious war" isn't out of the question.

Direct Russian military threat to Poland, greatly exaggerated in internal political debate, seems unlikely to materialise. However use of hybrid war instruments seem likely as a way to test states' integrity and strength of NATO's internal commitments. It is important in that context to identify Russia's short and medium – term goals, which is significantly more difficult due to propaganda stereotypes constantly present in our security debate.

Efficient diplomacy remains a basic tool to ensure Poland's security in the face of Russian threat. If large part of Western elites won't be convinced defending Poles, Balts or Romanians is their vital interest, hybrid threats could materialize faster than we expect.

The need for new beginning in relations between Poland and Ukraine

In the context of presidential elections in Ukraine this spring it is important to ask about revival of relations between Poland and Ukraine. From 2015 to 2019 Polish – Ukrainian relationship visibly deteriorated. As a result we no longer are one of Ukraine's key partners in Europe.

The reason for this situation is Poland's declining position within the EU as well as making historical issues front and centre of bilateral relations with Kiev. Ill-conceived amendment to the law on Institute of National Remembrance was an obvious mistake. President Andrzej Duda's decision not to participate in the inauguration of the new President of Ukraine in May 2019 was a missed opportunity to quickly establish contact with new administration and propose new framework of cooperation.

Poland has the expertise necessary to influence reforms in Ukraine and help develop Kiev's relationship with the West. That view is still represented in Ukrainian politics and public debate. Both Ukrainian elites and the society still have reasonably high level of trust and sympathy for Poland and Poles.

In order to gain influence over West's policy towards Ukraine, we should improve Poland's relationship with Berlin and Paris and help rebuild and cement in the West belief in Poland's expertise in matters of Eastern neighbours. Main priority of Polish policy towards Ukraine remains to support Ukraine's independence as an important element of Poland's security.

Polish diplomacy should focus on reviving and strengthening Eastern Partnership. In the coming years a program addressed to Eastern Partnership countries, which signed Association Agreement with the EU, focused especially on Ukraine, should be proposed.

It is in Poland's best interest to see Ukraine's association with the EU succeed. Ahead of Polish presidency in the EU in 2025 we should work with our Ukrainian and European partners on preparing new, ground-breaking decisions.

In addition it is also important to boost our bilateral relations with Ukraine. In order to achieve this, we need to re-establish trust and regular high profile meetings and consultations

as well as propose new initiatives in different fields including security, economic cooperation, cross-border and interregional cooperation as well as cultural, scientific and cultural contacts.

One must not forget economy, where we notice a significant progress. Poland became one of Ukraine's main trade partners after a breakdown in 2014-15.

The fact that many Ukrainians are present on Polish labour market should encourage the authorities to propose friendlier migration policy. It is essential to divide historical dialogue between Poland and Ukraine from political dialogue and make it as professional as possible, for example by creating a group for difficult issues similar to a group which existed in Polish-Russian relations.

Moldova – a forgotten partner

Two biggest embassies in Chisinau belong to Russia and Romania. During the interwar period Republic of Moldova was a part of Romania and Romanian language is mother tongue of most of its citizens. While Romania doesn't declare any interest in Moldova's territory, their goal is to set the country on a path of European integration. On the other hand Moscow, aims to undisputedly make Moldova part of its sphere of influence. Bessarabia (as the region was historically called) would then become something similar to Kaliningrad region from geopolitical point of view.

In the years 2009 - 2014 Republic of Moldova, was a "model student" among post-soviet states participating in Eastern Partnership. Poland did a lot to help reforms taken by Moldavian government by supporting it within he EU and especially through work of Polish experts supporting different aspects of the reforms on behalf of the EU.

After 2014 political landscape in Moldavia changed. In 2016 disillusioned Moldavians elected pro-Russian politician Igor Dodon for president. However the person holding all the cards in Chisinau was Vlad Plahotniuc, richest Moldavian billionaire, who controlled the economy, large part of the media and political scene. Despite his declarations otherwise, Moldova ruled by politicians dependent on Plahotniuc didn't fulfil EU's expectations in terms of rule of law, fighting corruption and reforms bringing the country closed to Western standards. As a result the EU limited its support (including financial) for Chisinau.

Poland during the rule of Law and Justice party wasn't active in the policy towards Moldova, which was due to general lack of idea for Eastern policy, but could also be justified by political situation in Chisinau.

In the meantime situation in Moldova changed. A pro-Western opposition movement ACUM was established. After elections that ended in a tie, on June 8 a surprising coalition between Igor Dodon's party and pro-Western ACUM was formed. New government in which ACUM members are a majority is lead by Prime Minister Maia Sandu.

Platoniuk tried to block the new government, but after a few days was forced to back out due to lack of support of the society. There are many signs that all players involved in Moldova (US, EU, NATO and Russia) came to agreement to support the new government. Only Romania was initially sceptical, as Bucharest feared the change would in the end promote pro-Russian shift. It's possible that balance between pro-Russian and pro-Western forces would be long term, if Washington and Moscow reached a consensus on this issue.

Republic of Moldova should be treated more seriously than their current potential suggests as a territory where Russia and the West compete for influence in the former Soviet East. It is important to support Maia Sandu's government to increase pro-European ACUM's chances in future elections. In addition dialogue with Romania regarding Moldova must continue. We should support Romanian efforts to increase EU's activity in this country.

Belarus in the shadow of threats to independence

Since mid-1990s Poland essentially resigned from conducting active policy towards Belarus. Everything we could offer Belarusians was to boycott Lukashenko's government and freeze political contacts, while mutual trade developed reasonably well.

The prize Poland had to pay for supporting the opposition and circles critical of President Lukashenko's rule, were cool relations with Belarusian government.

Polish elites missed a significant shift in Belarusian – Russian cooperation format, which took place in first decade of XXI century. Aleksandr Lukashenko, who lost hope for succession of power in Russia, stated to strengthen Belarus' independence. Few times he tried to play with Western partners.

Eastern Partnership remains the most efficient format of cooperation between Belarus and the West. Belarus is not satisfied with the program, in which they feel like a second-rate state. However in 2017 they begun negotiations on Single Support Framework. Belarus sees Eastern Partnership mainly as an instrument of economic cooperation. Despite Minsk's reluctant attitude toward support for nongovernmental organisations and independent

communities, Lukashenko made some concessions allowing NGOs receive foreign grants. He hopes that in exchange EU will support infrastructural projects and open its markets for Belarusian products. Minsk also tried to become a liaison between EU and Eurasian Economic Union.

Poland's vital interest is to make sure Belarus maintains and expands its independence. At the moment Aleksandr Lukashenko is the only guarantee of keeping instruments of an independent state. Key question for the future Polish government is how to effectively increase Belarus' independence. An attempt of one-sided reset gave very limited results.

Within Eastern Partnership framework it is possible to support Belarus' energy independence, both politically and through opening alternative routes for transporting natural gas and oil, creating options to send gas from Poland and/or from Klaipeda terminal and supporting energy cooperation with Ukraine.

Building communication channels with Belarusian society remains important. Almost half (47%) of Belarusians declares that they trust in the EU. Perhaps it would be useful to strengthen interregional partnerships by inviting partners from key EU member states, especially from Germany.

It's necessary to conduct both formal and informal consultations with EU partners to discuss a reaction to possible attempts to limit or eradicate Belarusian independence, especially with Baltic States and Scandinavia.

Caucasus and Central Asia

Poland doesn't exploit existing positive stereotypes of Poles and their country neither in Central Asia, nor in the Caucasus. More importantly, the potential to strengthen Poland's position within EU and in relationship to Russia based on presence in the region, remains unused.

Due to the fact that Poland focuses on our closest neighbourhood, political thought concerning Central Asia and Southern Caucasus remains virtually non-existent. While Warsaw rightly support Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia, Poland can't justify why we believe Tbilisi to be a part of Europe.

Tools of Eastern Partnership are less used in relations with Southern Caucasus than in Ukraine, Moldova or even Belarus. Both Georgia and Armenia criticise EU for very limited involvement in supporting civil society. Azerbaijan essentially treats Eastern Partnership as a platform to promote their own view of the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh and getting funds for developing their oil and gas transit infrastructure.

Poland's policy towards Central Asia looks even worse. In most countries of that region we don't even have diplomatic posts, while embassies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have limited personnel and even more limited funds for their activity. Future government should notice that both those regions are an area of rivalry between superpowers.

If we believe that Russian Federation remains potential threat to Poland in the medium-term perspective, we should politically invest in best possible relationship with its Southern neighbours. The more pro-Western the governments of Caucasus and Central Asia are, the more attention Moscow will have to give to keeping its position there at the expense of expansion towards Western borders.

It would be useful to consult with the State Department and EEAS on harmonising diplomatic priorities in the face of Russian-Chinese competition. In that context we should work on increasing Polish representation in the EEAS outposts in the East. The representation of Poles in key position there is diminishing, while it seems that game between Washington, Beijing and Moscow will be especially intense in Central Asia and Caucasus.