1. The Eastern Neighbours and Russia

Chilly Relationships Hinge on Russian Behaviour in Ukraine

The annexation of Crimea and Russia’s engagement in the conflict in Donbas has led to the deterioration of Polish-Russian relations. Mutual relations are considered to be “cold” and there is no sign of improvement in the near future. There are a number of factors that may prevent both countries from achieving closer cooperation. First, Russia is not planning to withdraw its military involvement from Eastern Ukraine, which is unacceptable for Polish officials. Second, Poland has unambiguously taken the side of Ukraine in the current conflict and strongly supports this country – both with domestic reforms and in the international arena. Poland is perceived in Russia to be a country that promotes initiatives such as Eastern Partnership (EaP) to counter Russia’s influence in Eastern Europe. Another factor that negatively influences mutual relations is the fact that Poland is one of the policy leaders in maintaining and even strengthening sanctions imposed on Russia. Both the political elite (the ruling party – Civic Platform and the main opposition party – Law and Justice) and the majority of citizens agree that Russia’s current aggressive policy does not allow the European Union to ease sanctions, and if the situation in Donbas worsens again, the EU should be prepared to strengthen them.

Although relations between Poland and Russia are expected to remain cold in the near future, the Local Border Traffic initiative can be indicated as an example of positive cooperation that still exists despite complications, and should continue to function in the near future. Regional politicians from both sides underline that Local Border Traffic still has a positive impact on bilateral relations and it should not only be maintained, but widened to new cities on the Polish side.

Links:

- Ł. Wenerski, The borderland landscape: prospects and experiences of the functioning of the local border traffic regime with the Kaliningrad region, http://www.isp.org.pl/site.php?id=1051&lang=2

Strong Support for EaP, Despite Scepticism in Europe

Poland remains a supporter of tightening relations between EU and the Eastern Partnership countries and is ready to support EU perspectives of not only Ukraine, but also Georgia and Moldova. But the Polish position is not shared by the entire EU. Events in Ukraine have revealed how deep the divisions are within the EU over cooperation with the Eastern Partnership countries. Old disputes such as regarding prospective membership for countries like Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine are even stronger now. Visible problems include a lack of effective cooperation and vast differences of opinion over both the EaP and the situation in Ukraine among Visegrád countries, or V4, made up of Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. Although Polish authorities claim in official statements that V4 countries are coordinating their policies towards Ukraine, the reality differs. V4 countries cannot even agree on the basics: the role that Russia plays in the Ukraine conflict and the policy of sanctions towards Russia.

Events in Ukraine have also shown the magnitude of Russia’s influence on the Easter Partnership initiative. For example, Ukrainian implementation of the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area is planned to begin only in January 2016, due to pressure from Russia. It appears that particular countries are more willing to take the Kremlin opinion into account than the opinion of EaP countries involved in the initiative.
Ambivalence towards Ambivalent Results

Due to the fact that the Eastern Partnership is an initiative launched and strongly promoted by Poland, Polish authorities try to primarily focus on the positive aspects of the initiative. This was also the case with the summit in Riga. The Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grzegorz Schetyna has been underlining since the summit the fact that during the event European choice and aspirations of the EaP countries, as well as the reforms conducted in those countries, were acknowledged. Schetyna stated that in Riga the EU showed solidarity, emphasized the effectiveness of the Partnership, and drafted goals for the future.

Polish experts in eastern policy have remained ambivalent in their comments on the conclusions of the Riga summit. Some successes, such as signing the association agreements with Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova, have been achieved, and the EU officials were supported in their decision to represent and promote it. Nevertheless, critical voices have also been audible, claiming that the summit has revealed a general fatigue of the EaP and lack of readiness of EU countries to conduct necessary reforms in the EaP initiative. Authorities of EU countries have become even more reluctant to address the willingness of Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine to consider potential membership, due to pressure from Moscow, which strongly opposes the EaP as an initiative directed against Russia. Comments were also made about the fact that neither Ukraine nor Georgia has been given a concrete date of installing a visa free regime. It was met with criticism, but also understanding, especially in the case of Ukraine, which is still not ready for visa free regime because of the political situation.

Link:

NATO is the Only Guarantor of Safety in Europe

The statement of the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, from early March 2015 concerning the creation of a common EU army has not been met with a warm welcome among Polish officials. According to Schetyna, investments should be made to further strengthen NATO forces in Europe, as it is NATO that continues to guarantee the safety of Europe. Poland should also develop bilateral and multilateral military cooperation (common trainings) with other European countries. Stanisław Koziej, former head of the National Security Bureau (2010-2015), proposed that strengthening the Eastern flank of NATO would significantly increase safety. A common European army would only be possible after building up a more meaningful political union in the EU – The United States of Europe.

Polish society appears to be divided over the idea of an EU army. Both supporters and opponents of a common military force can be found among politicians, journalists, and political experts. Those who are opposed argue that such institutions are already in existence (NATO), and they must simply be modernised and adjusted to the current political situation (more forces on the Eastern flank). Another argument is that countries within the EU should instead concentrate on developing cooperation between national armies. Supporters of an EU army believe rather that the unstable situation in the eastern and southern neighbourhood of the EU should be cause for serious discussion about common European forces. The aim of such an army would be not to replace national or NATO forces but to supplement them. Others suggest that a Common European army would be strategic for Poland as it could calm the Polish fear of being left alone in a confrontation with Russia.

2. EU Enlargement

Openness to Expansion Tempered by Realism

Poland has always been a strong supporter and advocate of establishing stronger Euro-Atlantic ties with the Eastern EU neighbourhood, especially Ukraine. This means supporting membership in NATO, association with the EU, abolishing visas for Ukrainians, and - in the long-term perspective - accession to the EU. Hence Polish initiatives related to the East, such as the Eastern Partnership initiative, a Polish-Swedish proposal, and a priority of the Polish EU Presidency in 2011. Although Poland declares support of the European aspirations of all Eastern neighbours, its single priority has always
been Ukraine. Ukraine also remains a priority country for Poland’s foreign aid as well as a key-country for many Polish NGOs in the area of development cooperation.

The Russian-Ukrainian conflict resulted in an even stronger focus of Poland’s foreign policy in this country. In Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski’s annual speech on foreign policy between 2010 and 2013, Ukraine was mentioned on average 9 times; in the 2014 speech it was mentioned 62 times. For obvious reasons, Poland is in the group of EU states most involved, both politically and emotionally, in the conflict.

Due to the conflict, Ukraine’s integration with the EU is much less probable in any foreseeable future (and this for many experts in Poland is seen as a reason of Russia’s aggression). Therefore Polish officials do not mention it as often as before the crisis. One can argue that Poland seems to be less enthusiastic (or more realistic) about the possibility of Ukraine’s accession. However, it still remains the crucial long-term aim of Poland’s foreign and European policy. This is confirmed by the aforementioned 2014 speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who said, “Invariably, in our opinion, Ukraine should have [EU] membership perspective (…) That is why we welcomed the conclusions of the extraordinary meeting of the foreign ministers of the EU, which (…) states that the Association Agreement is not the ultimate goal of cooperation with Ukraine. Obviously, we are aware of the fact, that the European integration of Ukraine is a distant objective”.

Poland continues its efforts to include a “European perspective”, i.e. EU’s commitment to accept Ukraine once all conditions are fulfilled, in EU documents, arguing that such declarations motivated Poland in the 1990s to take up reforms required for membership. Ukraine is expected to follow the same path. These attempts of Polish diplomacy during the May 2015 Eastern Partnership Summit in Riga, however, were unsuccessful and ended in “acknowledging European aspirations” of Ukraine.

There is a political consensus in Poland (from the mainstream parties), that Ukraine should be given membership perspective. This was confirmed by unanimous voting on Ukraine’s Accession Agreement ratification in Polish parliament in November 2014. Generally, the Russian-Ukrainian conflict did not discourage Poland from supporting Ukraine’s integration with the EU, but made it realize that other member states oppose it stronger than before. It seems that this objective is now seen with more realism.

**Support in Principal, but National Focus Lies Elsewhere**

Focused on the eastern neighbourhood, Polish foreign policy has never been committed to Western Balkan issues, especially when comparing with foreign policy of other Visegrád Group countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary). However, Poland has always been supportive of EU enlargement to the region. The situation with Turkey is somewhat similar. This declarative support is generally not followed by a more dynamic Polish engagement in the region.

One can notice a broad consensus, including the ruling coalition parties and the opposition, that the EU enlargement to Western Balkans is in Poland’s interest and has to be supported. However, given Poland’s limited resources and ability to shape the EU agenda, Warsaw has to concentrate its efforts on the East, especially Ukraine, working to strengthen its ties with Euro-Atlantic institutions (EU and NATO). The long-term objective is EU accession. As a result of tactical choice or limited interest and ties with Southeast Europe, Poland will not be a leading advocate of Western Balkan’s enlargement, but will focus on the European aspirations of Ukraine.

Poland also declares support to Turkey’s accession, but this issue is also not a priority for Polish diplomacy. This political approach seems to mainly result from the belief that honest advocating in favour of Ukraine’s European aspirations requires supporting EU “open door” policy towards other potential members or candidates.

Both the Western Balkans’s and Turkey’s enlargement rarely appear in public debate in Poland. Only foreign policy experts from time to time call for stronger Polish involvement in South-Eastern Europe, arguing that Western Balkan countries have a crucial importance - for instance, for European energy security - and that these countries are potential Polish allies in the EU. Those supporting Turkish EU membership also call for stronger Polish activity in this field.

Interestingly, according to Eurobarometer surveys, Polish society is one of those in Europe most in favour of future EU enlargement. 64 percent support future enlargement (2015), 51 percent support Turkey’s accession (2006).

Although the Russian-Ukrainian conflict seems to make Ukraine’s EU accession even less likely in any foreseeable future, one can hardly see any impact of the conflict on Poland’s policy on the Western Balkans or Turkey.
Link:

EU-28 Watch

On the project

This EU-28 Watch is part of the project called Eastern Neighbours and Russia: Close links with EU citizens (ENURC) in collaboration with TEPSA. The project focuses on developing EU citizens’ understanding of the topic of the Eastern Neighbourhood and Russia and aims at encouraging their interest and involvement in this policy which has an impact on their daily lives.

The EU-28 Watch project is mapping out the discourses on these issues in European policies all over Europe. Research institutes from all 28 member states are invited to give overviews on the discourses in their respective countries.

This survey was conducted on the basis of a questionnaire that has been elaborated in March 2015. Most of the reports were delivered in June 2015. This issue and all previous issues are available on the recently relaunched EU-28 Watch website: www.EU-28Watch.org.

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