POLISH EASTERN POLICY

Summary of the report

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INTRODUCTION

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

That does not mean that Poland should not have a policy towards its Eastern partners. However, this policy must be a part of a wider foreign policy project, which the current government does not seem to have. Therefore, the current Eastern policy remains reactive and dictated by demands of internal policies and electoral campaigns. This report aims to present directions for future Polish governments and start a debate to reach an internal consensus on foreign policy goals, regardless of election 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 combined with inaction and plays right into the dreams of Kremlin’s strategists.

In the past, the strength of Polish democratic opposition and, later, first democratic governments laid in their strong formal and informal ties with 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 the Kaliningrad region, lack of long term youth exchange programs, Russian language no longer taught and no cooperation between universities are factors holding up this kind of individual contacts. Poland’s position as a point of contact with Russian civil society in the EU has been 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 arises from a dispute with the Russian government, not with Russian society.
Poland should be ready to take part in EU’s and NATO’s dialogue with Russia. Attitude of an offended child who is opposed to 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 should not 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 the EU and NATO. Even a consistent idea for Poland’s strategy will not be successful if we do not 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 a medium-term period, the key event seems to be a shift of the United States’ position from an importer to exporter of energy. Due to that shift, the US will be less interested in the Middle East and is likely find many common interests with Russia. On the other hand, Europe, and China, will become energy recipients. Polish Eastern policy must take into account potential reversal of alliances, even if it seems unlikely from the current perspective due to the democratic deficit in China and both China’s and EU’s dependence on exports.

The question of US-Russia relationship is essential for our security policy. Ever since the war in Georgia, Russian Federation has used military as a basic policy tool, including in Europe. That changes the existing security paradigm. Putin’s Russia is using military conflict for internal stabilisation and building authorities’ popularity. Unfavourable polls suggesting another “short, victorious war” is not out of question.

Direct Russian military threat to Poland, greatly exaggerated in the internal political debate, seems unlikely to materialise. However, the use of a hybrid warfare instruments seems likely as a way to test states’ integrity and the 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 a large part of Western elites will not be convinced that defending Poles, Balts or Romanians lies in their vital interest, hybrid threats could materialize faster than we expect.
THE NED 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 the revival of relations between Poland and Ukraine. From 2015 to 2019, Polish-Ukrainian relationships have visibly deteriorated. As a result, we no longer are one of Ukraine’s key partners in Europe.

The reason for this, is Poland’s declining position within the EU as well as bringing historical issues to the forefront 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 contacts with the 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 the Ukrainian politics and public debate. Both Ukrainian elites and society still have a reasonably high level of trust and liking 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 the belief in Poland’s expertise in matters related to our 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 the Eastern Partnership. In the coming years, a program should be proposed addressed to the Eastern Partnership countries, which signed the Association Agreement with the EU, focused especially on Ukraine.

It is in Poland’s best interest to see Ukraine’s association with the EU succeed. Ahead of Poland’s 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 has become one of Ukraine’s main trade partners after a breakdown in 2014-15.

A large number of Ukrainians on the Polish labour market should encourage the authorities to propose friendlier migration policy. It is essential to separate the historical dialogue between Poland and Ukraine from the political dialogue and make it as professional as possible, for example by creating a group for difficult issues similar to a group that existed in the Polish-Russian relations.

MOLDOVA – A FORGOTTEN PARTNER

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

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

After 2014, the political landscape in Moldavia changed. In 2016 disillusioned Moldavians elected a pro-Russian politician Igor Dodon for president. However, the player holding all the cards in Chisinau was Vlad Plahotniuc, the richest Moldavian billionaire, who controlled the economy, large part of the media and the political stage. Despite his declarations otherwise, Moldova ruled by politicians dependent on Plahotniuc did not fulfil EU’s expectations in terms of rule of law, fighting corruption and reforms closing the country’s doors to the Western standards. As a result, the EU limited its support (including financial) for Chisinau.
Poland during the rule of Law and Justice party was not active in the policy towards Moldova due to the general lack of a vision for an Eastern policy, but could also be justified by political situation in Chisinau.

In the meantime, the situation in Moldova changed again. A pro-Western opposition movement ACUM was established. After the 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, where ACUM members hold a majority, is led by Prime Minister Maia Sandu.

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

Republic of Moldova should be treated more seriously than its current potential may suggest 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, the dialogue with Romania regarding Moldova must be continued. 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 has essentially given up any 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 price Poland had to pay for supporting the opposition and circles critical of President Lukashenko’s rule, was cool relations with the Belarusian government.

Polish elites missed a significant shift in the Belarusian-Russian cooperation format, which took place in the first decade of the 21st century. Aleksandr Lukashenko, who lost hope for succession of power in Russia, stated to strengthen Belarus’ independence. Several times, he has tried to play with Western partners.
Eastern Partnership remains to be the most efficient format of cooperation between Belarus and the West. Belarus is not satisfied with the program where they feel like a second-rate state. However, in 2017 they began negotiations on the Single Support Framework. Belarus sees the Eastern Partnership mainly as an instrument of economic cooperation. Despite Minsk’s reluctant attitude toward the support for nongovernmental organisations and independent communities, Lukashenko made some concessions allowing NGOs to receive foreign grants. He hopes that in exchange the EU will support infrastructural projects and open its markets for Belarusian products. Minsk also tried to become a liaison between the 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 at a one-sided reset gave very limited results.

Within the 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 declare 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 is 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 does not exploit the existing positive stereotypes of Poland and the Polish either in Central Asia or in the Caucasus. More importantly, the potential to strengthen Poland’s position within the EU and in relationship to Russia based on presence in that region remains unused.
As Poland focuses on its closest neighbourhood, political thought concerning Central Asia and Southern Caucasus remains virtually non-existent. While Warsaw rightly supports Euro-Atlantic aspirations of Georgia, it cannot justify why we believe Tbilisi to be a part of Europe.

Tools of the Eastern Partnership are less used in relations with Southern Caucasus than in Ukraine, Moldova or even Belarus. Both Georgia and Armenia criticise the EU for very limited involvement in supporting civil society. Azerbaijan essentially treats the 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 do not even have diplomatic posts, while embassies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have limited personnel and even more limited funds for their activities. Future government should take note that both those regions are an area of rivalry between superpowers.

If we believe that Russia remains a potential threat to Poland in the medium-term period, we should politically invest in the 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 pay 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 positions there is diminishing, while it seems that the game between Washington, Beijing and Moscow will be especially intense in Central Asia and Caucasus.

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