

Bulletin

Institute for Western Affairs

**The future of the European Union in Polish
political journalism.**

Contributions to discourse.

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Theses:

1. The majority of Polish journalist writing on “European” matters is reactive. The appearing publications offer commentaries on current political initiatives or EU summits. That makes the Polish discourse on the future of the European Union no different than that found in other countries.

2. Most viewpoints expressed in discussions about the future of the European Union and Poland's role in united Europe appearing in Poland's opinion-making press reflect the country's political disputes. The majority of the theses they present follow from assessments of the condition of the Polish state as well as the country's economy and society.

3. The Polish debate on the European Union has been dominated by people who advocate moving Poland's association with the European Union beyond membership alone, in keeping with a strong trend of further integration in the spirit of federalism. Emphasis in the debate has shifted so far that critics of EU reform have been labeled anti-European. While staunch opponents of Poland's membership in the Union have found themselves far removed from the debate mainstream, those who are still in it do not express their views openly and focus on describing developments, many of them as unhealthy.

4. A major role in the debate on the future architecture of Europe has been played by experts, many of them advocates of a Federal Europe who believe in the need for further integration. What has been missing noticeably from the debate is a thorough impartial roundup of the real benefits which Poland stands to derive from its membership in the European Union. Note that much of the funding available to promote the advantages of EU membership comes from the EU itself, which naturally undermines the credibility of such assessments.

5. Many publications glaringly ignore and consequently reject some of the fundamental principles underpinning Poland's foreign policy pursued since 1989 and lack the historical perspective needed to identify Poland's long-term objectives.



Poland's accession into the European Union coincided with intense negotiations and heated debates on the EU's institutional reform. The unambiguous position on the issue adopted by Poland's successive governments (originally left-wing and centrist, finally right-wing) raised controversy in certain western capitals and in the Polish press. The dispute over Poland's stance on European architecture was aggravated further under the rule of the Law & Justice party. The matter came to the forefront as a central issue dividing politicians as well as Poland's public opinion and journalists. After the autumn 2007 breakthrough brought about by the Civic Platform's electoral victory, which relegated the Law & Justice party into opposition, the cleft in Poland's public opinion grew ever deeper, especially in the aftermath of the Smolensk plane crash of 2010. As it appears, one of the reasons for the Civic Platform's electoral victory (also in 2011) and for its success in the years that followed was the conviction that the party pursued a pragmatic foreign policy line and accomplished its specific objectives by forging alliances with foreign partners avoiding head-to-head confrontation. The view was reflected in the way the press commented on the activities of the Polish government.

The changes in Poland's foreign policy concurred with the financial crisis which hit the United States and the European Union. As opposed to the three governments before it, Donald Tusk's administration committed itself to remain in Europe's "mainstream". The opposition and the commentators who were critical of the government saw this as a proclivity to yield to the suggestions of the Union's "main players", particularly Germany, with which relations had been excellent since 2007. The financial crisis which erupted in 2008 thoroughly changed the political environment. After a brief period of confusion, calls were made to speed up integration and abandon the approach proposed in the just concluded Lisbon Treaty (negotiated in 2007, signed into law in December 2008 and brought into life in December 2009).

The majority of the commentaries and articles on the future of Europe published in Poland were a response to the successive EU summits and various political initiatives. Some of them referred to reprints of key articles from foreign press, to the widely discussed speeches by Jürgen Habermas (especially of April 2011 and May and August 2012, the latter with contributions by Peter Bofinger and Julian Nida-Rümelin) or to Daniel Cohn-Bendit and Félix Marquardt's appeal (of September 2013, covered less extensively in Poland) to abandon the idea of a national state. As for the statements made by Polish politicians, the most impactful of them were the Berlin speech by Minister Radosław Sikorski delivered before the *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik* and a series of favorable commentaries by outstanding Polish authors published in the *Gazeta Wyborcza* daily, which



at the time was entirely dedicated to promoting the Minister's ideas (its headline went as far as to say: "Europa mówi Sikorskim" ("Sikorski becomes EU's mouthpiece").

One can hardly blame Polish authors for being purely responsive in their commentaries. All other countries have reacted similarly. Besides, leading politicians in the Union's major states have consistently shied away from bold ideas and visionary projects. At any rate, Polish journalism is not a hotbed of ideas and can hardly be expected to become one.

The approaches of Poland's journalists and commentators to EU developments and projects designed to redefine the Union run along the lines of the political divide. This is also true for Warsaw's views on current "pro-European" policies. The judgments presented in the press appear - without fail - to reflect their author's views on present-day Poland, the condition of the state, the economy and society and, in an even broader sense, by the result of Poland's social, political and economic transition. Such authors are generally "pro-European" in the sense of being open to the idea of a Federal Europe. On the other hand, the journalists sympathizing with the political right (most of whom support the Law & Justice and the smaller splinter groups which have broken off from it) have been voicing strong objections to such ideas. By and large, however, even the "Eurosceptics" are not opposed to Poland's presence in EU structures.

Nearly all steadfast opponents of the European Union have been removed from the debate "mainstream"; the general impression is that their views are no longer published even in those opinion-making periodicals which mete out stinging criticism of the EU's line. Such opponents write chiefly for small-circulation periodicals and websites. As a consequence, only one of the two extreme viewpoints maintains its presence in the public eye: its proponents favor the preparedness to embrace further integration and gradually build a superstate or the United States of Europe [see B. Jałowiecki, "Nie bójmy się Stanów Zjednoczonych Europy" ("Do not fear the United States of Europe"), *Rzeczpospolita*, Dec. 19, 2011].

A key role in the debate on the EU's future architecture is played by authors who professionally deal with European issues. However, such views are merely expressed in press articles. The scene is heavily influenced by governmental propaganda whose materials, prepared by government-affiliated experts, are passed off as impartial, objective and reliable reports.

Another manifestation of the same problem is the unavailability of impartial and reliable all-around studies on Poland's nearly decade-long membership in the European Union. As noted by an author known for his left-wing affiliations, "it is inappropriate to



evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of membership (and the accession agreement), as it is redolent of Euroscepticism” [R. Bugaj, “Scenariusze dla kontynentu” (“Scenarios for the Continent”), *Uważam Rze*, December 27, 2011]. The materials are clearly one-sided and surreptitiously funded by the governmental. A case in point is a generous subsidy from the Ministry of Regional Development awarded to articles which “boost and enhance the positive image of European Funds”. The Ministry’s competition favored writers who “described successful deployments of EU-financed projects and their benefits”. An additional requirement was for the commissioned propaganda articles to closely follow the usual format of other press materials, which the editor in chief of the *Polityka* weekly referred to as “reader deception with pseudo-articles”, covert advertising and “manifestly corrupt propositions” [J. Baczyński, “Wstyd, Pani Minister. Jak pisać o Funduszach Europejskich” (“Shame on you, Madam Minister. How to write about EU Funds”), *Polityka*, December 12, 2012]. As a matter of fact, the problem extends beyond public relations alone. As noted by Ryszard Bugaj, “the majority of ‘EU research’ is financed with EU funds. Brussels bureaucracy is adept at sponsoring opinion-makers, which fundamentally affects its image” [R. Bugaj, “Scenariusze...” (“Scenarios ...”)].

As a consequence, a substantial proportion of commentators ignore the irregularities which accompany the spending of EU funds in Poland, including wastefulness, inefficiencies the reckless incurrence of debt by municipalities and corruption. The significance of Poland's contributions to the EU budget is downplayed, with little coverage given to the national matching funds required in EU financed projects and the costs of transactions and EU fund management. A. Sadowski, “Polsce dyktuje się, co powinna chcieć, a nie to, co jej potrzebne” (“Poland is told what to want, not what it needs”) (an interview), *Rzeczpospolita* April 4, 2013]. What did make headline news was the PLN 300 billion in aid, mentioned originally in a well-known Civil Platform commercial used in the party’s 2011 electoral campaign. The money was to enable Poland to make a leap forward in its overall development in the years to come. The general impression was that many authors considered such Brussels aid to constitute the main argument in favor of Poland’s integration into the European Union.

A flagrant example of underscoring Poland's role in the European Union were numerous commentaries on Poland's Council Presidency during the second half of 2011. Only a handful of publishers noted that the institution of council presidency has lost a great deal of its significance since the Lisbon Treaty. The media coverage, however, focused predominantly on presenting Poland as a leading player in Europe.

The texts published in the Polish press concern not as much the future of the European Union as the possible options and alternatives for Polish foreign policy. This is in



fact well advised as little is known on where Europe may end up once it is done with its current drifting around. What remains, therefore, are general conjectures accompanied by distinct and often hard-hitting attempts to sell the public opinion on the need to accept a largely uncertain project. This is paradoxical, especially that advocates of accelerated integration often resort to somewhat radical rhetoric. A good example of this is a column by Magdalena Środa [*Gazeta Wyborcza*, November 30, 2011] which ironically ridicules anyone determined to “defend their independence’, ‘their backwoods’ ad infinitum” noting that deprived of Europe’s “grand moral and cultural revolution” “we will wake up one day with a mentality irreconcilable with that of the rest of Europe”. The journalists representing this line went as far as to urge the government to get on with its fundamental decisions such as those regarding the fiscal compact and Poland’s membership in the eurozone. In December 2012, Jacek Pawlicki, a *Gazeta Wyborcza* commentator, appealed for having the earliest possible date of Poland’s eurozone accession announced urgently claiming it was critical to make the decision immediately and that a few months from then would already be too late.

Most Polish journalists think little of the fact that the true nature of the five-year financial downturn is actually unknown. The consequences of joining the eurozone give rise to controversies. Hardly does an expert speak of the consequences of Poland’s EU accession as frankly as Marek Cichocki, who said “I really don’t know” [“Tamtej Unii już nie ma” (“That Union is Gone”), an interview with Marek Cichocki conducted by R. Mazurek, *Rzeczpospolita – PlusMinus*, January 26-27, 2013].

Notably, certain categorical statements have been inserted into the discourse to remain in it permanently. According to one of them, the only viable options available in the financial crisis are to “either to pursue further integration or allow disintegration” [Tomasz Lis, *Wprost*, 49/2011]. Another is that Poland should become part of Europe’s “hard core” and consistently strive towards European federalism as the only other alternative available at the moment is complete marginalization. Another yet claims that, for economic and geostrategic reasons, Poland’s only choice is to accept Germany’s future leadership of Europe as the United States has been distancing itself from European affairs and because of Russia. While rarely noted, the latter consideration has been brought up by Andrzej Talaga and Filip Memches in the *Rzeczpospolita* daily. One article which has captured a strong following after it appeared in Polish press is *Tylko Niemcy nas uratują* (*Only Germans can save us*) by Witold Gadomski whose lead, presumed to have been intentionally provocative, stated: “Integration can only gain momentum on the terms imposed by Germany. Which is fine ...” [*Gazeta Wyborcza*, September 1-2, 2012].

References have also been made to political realism. “The goal is to turn Poland into a key European player. To achieve it, Poland needs to stay on board the European train



rather than being shunted to a siding and into a heritage park of national sovereignty. It needs to fight to remain in a first class luxury car rather than a freight car. To that end, it must reform itself, cure its economy, adopt the euro and gain a greater say in European affairs” [Tomasz Lis, *Wprost*, 50/2011]. At about the same time, Adam Krzemiński proposed a supposed alternative: “Either Poland becomes part of the EU's hard core contributing to the establishment of its federal structure or it will follow Ukraine’s example and drift eastward into the political and economic steppes. Those afraid that a federated EU becomes ‘German’ should look closer and see the positive balance of trade between Poland and Germany and Poland's recent development boom supported with EU and largely also German money and hear the German debate on the future of Europe” [*Polityka*, 50/2011].

Any researcher of Poland's recent foreign policy will unavoidably note the short-term historic amnesia which glaringly afflicts a great number of Polish journalists. Few note the quiet radical restructuring of Poland's fundamental foreign policies. For over nine decades up until a few years ago, Poland was fundamentally opposed to the European Directory of powers. For over a dozen years, Poland's politicians have sought to prevent the division of Europe into areas of different speeds supporting a proper European unity in its stead. These precepts were used to formulate the foreign policies of successive centrist, liberal, left-wing and right-wing governments. Their advocates have also been in agreement about distancing themselves from the federalist idea. Even some leftist politicians and authors referred to the idea of Charles de Gaulle and his vision of “the Europe of homelands”. Most forget the difficulties experienced in negotiating the Lisbon Treaty, signed only a few years ago and currently described as claptrap suited only to be tossed onto a scrap heap of oblivion. Many journalists view the principles unquestioned in the previous decade as no longer applicable.

On the other end of the spectrum is the critical narrative in which certain opinions, such as those quoted above, are presented as naïve illusions and political marketing. The critics point out that Poland has lost much of its post-2007 significance and needs to strive to remain sovereign and have its interests, which are permanently at risk, properly recognized. They claim that the praise of the Polish government coming from leading Western politicians only results from the conviction that Warsaw no longer jeopardizes the accomplishment of goals which the key European Union states have agreed to pursue. The central-rightist press blames the Polish government for treating Poland's interests negligently, to say the least. They claim that Poland can only join the Directory of European powers in appearance while in fact it will never be able to sway the constellation of European states to accept its position.

Polish “Eurosceptics”, including some authors who define themselves as left-wing, warn that European institutions will be undemocratic and fail to express the will of the people. Even today, an unmistakable gap can be seen between the standpoints of the



majority of the political elites and the popular views and beliefs among the nations of Europe. The authors doubt seriously whether the “federal” Europe will indeed be democratic. In addition, conservative journalists warn against encroaching into the realms of morals and ethics as the European institutions should not be allowed to influence such areas. Particularly harsh criticism has been dealt towards the growing secularization.

All in all, the bulk of the debates on the future of Europe involving Polish journalists concern the shape of Polish pragmatism and how to perceive and pursue Polish national interests. While both sides of the dispute are convinced of being realists, their solutions differ fundamentally.

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

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