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**Research Report**

## Poland and the East: Poland's relations with Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in the context of European Eastern policy

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## Poland and the East

### Poland's Relations with Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine in the Context of European Eastern Policy

*Kai-Olaf Lang*

The celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II brought to light new controversies between Poland and Russia. The upsets stem from differences of historical interpretation, especially concerning twentieth-century events, but their roots are also to be found in diverging foreign and security policy interests. At the same time—in recent weeks—tensions flared up between Poland and Belarus. These setbacks came only shortly after Poland had achieved a major eastern policy success in the form of its intervention during Ukraine's Orange Revolution. The close partnership with Ukraine and the difficult relations with Russia that Poland brought with it when it joined the European Union have contributed to an "easternization" of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In order to make use of Poland's eastern policy expertise for the European Union and at the same time "defuse" Poland's conflict-laden relations with Russia, Germany and Poland should organize an ongoing discussion process around questions of European eastern policy and neighborhood policy.

#### **The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

As well as watchfully following developments in the post-Soviet region, Warsaw also works to stabilize and democratize its neighbors. Poland enjoys fundamentally different relations with each of its three eastern neighbors—Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus, or "the good, the bad, and the ugly." Ukraine is regarded as a strategic partner and counterweight to Russia, which Poland sees as posing all kinds of security risk, while Belarus is feared as an unpredictable autocracy on the eastern flank.

Poland's hierarchy of foreign policy

objectives results from the combination of the following eastern policy interests:

- ▶ Poland endeavors to create and maintain geopolitical pluralism in the post-Soviet region. This means that Poland has an interest in repelling neoimperial tendencies (real or perceived) on the other side of its eastern border and in supporting the establishment of sovereign, western-oriented states in the region.
- ▶ As well as wanting its immediate neighbors to be stable and well-governed, Poland also has an interest in these being states where democracy, the rule of law, minority rights, and human rights are

solidly established. To that extent, Warsaw has an interest in the “soft” export of democracy and values and in a homogenization of its eastern neighbors.

- ▶ The Orange Revolution in Ukraine represented Poland’s biggest eastern foreign policy success, because the creation of a reform-oriented Ukraine striving to join Euro-Atlantic structures, relativizing Russian dominance, and thus guaranteeing a geopolitical reconstruction of the East, has been the foreign policy *cantus firmus* of all Polish governments since the democratic transformation fifteen years ago. This also explains why Poland has consistently advocated offering Ukraine a perspective of membership of NATO and the European Union.
- ▶ Warsaw wishes to avoid new divisions arising on the Polish EU external border following enlargement, and consequently argues for liberalization measures in the border regime (within European Union and Schengen rules) and for a reduction in cross-border wealth disparities.
- ▶ Poland would like to exploit the potential of the eastern markets. Currently, less than 3 % of Polish exports go to Ukraine. Exports to Russia have been systematically increased in recent years (the figure of 4.0% for the first quarter of 2005 was well up on the 2.4% for the same quarter of the previous year), but the Polish balance of trade with Russia remains deep in the red due to energy imports.
- ▶ Although Poland generally aims to intensify economic cooperation with Russia, it would like to reduce what it sees as overdependence in the field of energy. For that reason Warsaw is trying to diversify its oil and gas supplies and create interdependency in its pipeline policies. There are also doubts about involving Russian corporations in the privatization of the energy sector.

Involvement in Ukraine has brought Poland closer to its eastern policy goals, but recent months have cast a spotlight on the

Achilles heel of Polish foreign policy—Russia. Warsaw has neither formulated an explicit policy toward Russia, nor developed activities at the EU level comparable to those for Ukraine. Poland’s policy toward Russia was to put Ukraine first, and the eastern policy euphoria that followed Viktor Yushchenko’s election victory has quickly been dispelled by new tensions with Russia and sharp differences with Belarus.

### **Poland and Russia: New Quarrels**

Four factors are responsible for the current trouble in Polish-Russian relations: diverging historical interpretations, Poland’s intervention in and for Ukraine, questions of energy policy, and Poland’s criticism of Russia’s policies toward Chechnya.

The list of differences over the interpretation of important events of recent history is long. It extends from Moscow’s questions about the fate of tens of thousands of dead Russian prisoners of war in 1920, through Russia’s ambivalent attitude to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and Moscow’s reluctance to allow Polish historians to freely research the mass executions in Katyn in 1940, to Russia’s demonstrative idealization of the post-war division of Europe as laid out at Yalta.

These irritations gained new momentum through the discussion within Poland about whether President Aleksander Kwaśniewski should travel to Moscow for the celebrations of the sixtieth anniversary of the end of World War II. Kwaśniewski’s participation in the Moscow commemoration served two goals. Firstly, he wanted to use the opportunity to underline Poland’s perspective on World War II and the developments in its aftermath through symbolic acts such as laying wreaths for members of the Polish resistance who came to death in the Soviet Union and for other victims of Stalinist terror. Secondly, Kwaśniewski also wanted to dispel the accusation that there was an “anti-Russian phobia” in Poland.

He cannot have had great success in achieving these goals, because during the

ceremonies in Moscow neither Russia nor the international community took much notice of Kwaśniewski's message. The main complaint in Poland was that President Vladimir Putin failed to pay proper tribute to Poland's role as a wartime ally against Germany, while General Wojciech Jaruzelski's participation in the ceremonies and his receipt of a medal for services in the Red Army during the liberation of Poland also met with criticism. For these reasons, public approval of Kwaśniewski's trip fell sharply following his return.

The second major source of conflict is Poland's intervention in Ukraine. Poland's success in mobilizing a certain degree of interest among its European partners, or at least in raising awareness, must have been particularly hard to swallow for certain Russian observers. Kwaśniewski's comment that "for any major power a Russia without Ukraine is better than a Russia with Ukraine," to which he added that this also applied to the United States (and not only to Poland), was hardly subtle but it does reveal one of the overriding goals of Polish eastern policy, namely, to ease Ukraine out of Russia's orbit. The sharp responses from Moscow show that Kwaśniewski's statement was understood correctly there. Even though the Polish president did not attend the summit of the GUAM group (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) on April 22—probably as a concession to Russia—Poland must still hold a strong interest in revitalizing this regional formation, which sees itself as an alternative to Russian integration efforts in the post-Soviet region.

Thirdly, Poland finds itself unduly dependent on Russia for its energy needs. About 95% of Poland's oil supplies and roughly two thirds of its gas imports come from Russia. Brief shortages such as occurred in February 2004, when Gasprom attempted to force the Belorussian Beltransgas to its knees by cutting off supplies, posed no real danger to Polish raw material supplies, but they did arouse great nervousness in Warsaw. Although Poland is attempting to diversify geographically, espe-

cially in the case of its natural gas imports, plans in the 1990s for a major supply contract with Norway that would have allowed the Poles to break the dominance of Russian imports never came to fruition. Consequently, Poland's strategy is to create interdependency in the supply system by allowing Russian gas to be transported across Polish territory to western Europe. Whereas Warsaw previously supported the construction of a second pipeline parallel to the existing Yamal Pipeline (Russia–Belarus–Poland–Germany), the government now, (together with Latvia and Lithuania) favors the Amber Pipeline project, which would bypass Belarus and run to the west via Latvia, Lithuania, Kaliningrad, and Poland. This project stands in competition to the Baltic Pipeline envisaged by Germany and Russia.

The Odessa–Brody–Płock–Gdansk oil pipeline project is designed to transport crude oil from the Caspian Sea region to Poland and western Europe and in the process diversify Polish oil imports and strengthen the Ukraine in geoeconomic and geopolitical terms. Although on the Ukrainian side the pipeline has been completed from the Black Sea to Brody in western Ukraine, work came to a halt due to supply problems and disagreements over the pipeline's direction of flow. Although Poland supports the project politically, it has not yet been possible to construct the section between Brody and Płock (the central Polish city where the pipeline would meet existing pipelines running to the north and west; also the headquarters of PKN Orlen). When Yushchenko visited Warsaw in mid-April, Poland and Ukraine reiterated their interest in the project, which they would like to see completed by 2008.

The Poles are no less skeptical about potential Russian investment in their energy sector. Certainly, the weight of the Russian factor often resonates in Polish energy policy, for example in scandals over the role of Polish politicians and businessmen and Polish and Russian secret services in the planned privatization of the refinery in Gdansk, and in the conclusion of lucrative

supply contracts for PKN Orlen, but also in the announced privatization of the state-owned gas supplier PGNiG. The former head of the Polish secret service, Zbigniew Siemiątkowski, summed up Poland's fears in his much-quoted claim that the Russian empire was being restored using the instruments of the energy trade, following the motto "yesterday tanks, today oil." The warning voices in Warsaw feel vindicated by statements such as that made by the Russian trade attaché in Poland, who said in an interview for the Interfax news agency that greater stability of Russian crude oil supplies would only be possible if Russian businesses were included in the privatization of the Polish energy sector.

Fourthly and lastly, Polish criticism of the state of democracy and the rule of law in Russia has also been a source of friction. Poland's stance on the Chechnya conflict, in particular, regularly provokes disagreement. For example, after the Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov was allegedly shot to death by a Russian commando unit in March, a spokesman for the Polish foreign ministry called the action a "crime" and "political stupidity," prompting furious responses in Moscow.

### **Poland and Belarus: Unforeseen Trouble**

To date Polish foreign policy has officially followed a dual strategy toward Belarus, reducing top-level political relations to the greatest possible extent in line with the attitude of the European Union, while maintaining restricted official contacts at the working level—cautious support for civil society and also selective cooperation, for example in the fields of infrastructure, customs, and border security. This pragmatic course was not enough to prevent Minsk from launching fierce verbal attacks on Warsaw, culminating in the speech of April 19 by Belorussian President Alexander Lukashenko in which he openly warned the Polish embassy against "turning the heads" of the members of the Polish minority in

Belarus. Warsaw reacted with restrained irritation.

Another step taken by the Minsk regime had greater consequences. There was uproar in Poland when the Belorussian interior ministry annulled a leadership election of the Union of Poles in Belarus, whose results had displeased the authorities. President Kwaśniewski said that the actions of the Belorussian authorities were "scandalous" and "unacceptable," while Foreign Minister Adam Rotfeld called the neighboring state an "open-air museum of everything Europe rejects." Rotfeld announced a travel ban on the Belorussian officials involved in the measures against the Polish minority's organization. Subsequently both sides expelled diplomats.

Despite the "diplomatic war" and abundant provocation from Minsk, Poland will continue to follow a patient course toward Belarus, avoiding a total boycott of the country not least with the interests of the Polish minority in mind. Prime Minister Marek Belka said that the Poles wanted to help Belorussian society, but that the government in Minsk had to be kept in isolation.

This suggests that Poland will probably expand its support for Belorussian civil society in order to do everything possible to lay the groundwork for a later democratization of the country. The idea of setting up a radio station on Polish territory broadcasting to Belarus in the Belorussian language would represent one step in that direction. Polish officials have also emphasized that Ukraine, inspired by Poland, is now also developing numerous initiatives for Belarus.

### **Poland's Eastern Policy in the European Union**

Poland's relations with its eastern neighbors also influence the European Union's cooperation with Russia and other eastern European partners. Warsaw's—absolutely legitimate—intention in the European Union is to bring its own eastern policy

ideas into the hierarchy of objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. In that sense, a “double Europeanization” of Polish eastern policy has been under way for several years.

On the one hand, Poland would like in particular to make use of the framework offered by European neighborhood policy. Consequently, the Polish foreign ministry has produced numerous suggestions for concretizing neighborhood policy and cooperation programs, especially with Ukraine (e.g. non-papers on the “Eastern Dimension” and neighborhood policy, Polish proposal for the Action Plan for Ukraine, German-Polish Council initiative on Ukraine).

On the other hand, Poland is keen to present its eastern policy interests as European Union matters and to raise the profile of its eastern neighbors in the Union. President Kwaśniewski expressed this quite unmistakably when he pointed out that in his mediation mission to the Ukraine he had from the outset worked to Europeanize his crisis management. Poland would also like to see a stronger European Union profile in response to the latest developments in Belarus. According to Kwaśniewski, moves to support the Belorussian opposition, for example, should be initiated by the European Union. Polish MEPs are particularly active in this respect, especially Bogdan Klich, chair of the European Parliament’s delegation responsible for Belarus, and at the Third Council of Europe Summit, which took place on May 16 and 17 in Warsaw, it was the urging of the Polish presidency that put Belarus at the top of the agenda. Poland’s intentions here are clear: only if its aims are “Europeanized” will they gain international resonance. And that is the only way to reduce the risk of being perceived on the other side of its eastern border as an east central European regional power pursuing nothing but its own interests.

Poland has discovered the Common Foreign and Security Policy by way of “the East.” Polish proposals for the Commission and in the Council, and not least the activi-

ties of Polish members of the Strasbourg parliament have made their mark on European neighborhood policy—and Poland has shown that it can influence European Union foreign policy.

As far as Russia is concerned, Poland is keen to integrate its bilateral relations in the web of cooperation between Russia and the European Union. Like other east central European members and smaller member states, Poland sees cooperation between Brussels and Moscow as the heart of Europe’s relationship with Russia. Consequently, Warsaw does not welcome the close relations between certain European Union capitals and Moscow. The Poles suspect Russia of attempting to tar them with the brush of Russophobia within the European Union, suspecting that deliberate affronts from Moscow are intended to provoke them into overreacting—and making Poland appear to other EU member states such as France and Germany as a troublemaker that should better be left out of discussion of cooperation with Russia.

### **Poland’s Eastern Policy and the United States**

Why is Poland keen to have a strong trans-Atlantic component in the formulation of cooperative relations with the East?

- ▶ Firstly, the United States, like Poland, views developments in the post-Soviet region through a strongly geostrategic prism. Poland welcomes America’s intervention in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and eastern Europe as an attempt to build a democratic “ring of friends” round Russia and thus to limit Russian influence in the CIS and the nearby countries.
- ▶ Secondly, Warsaw believes that the United States takes a realistic attitude to Russia. It certainly has not escaped Polish notice that a new form of pragmatic cooperation between the United States and Russia focused on the shared interest in combating global terrorism has gained ground since September 11,

2001, but, according to the prevailing belief in Poland, Washington has always maintained a healthy skepticism and does not hesitate to denounce curtailments of democratic freedoms.

- ▶ Thirdly, Warsaw welcomes the American side's open demand for Russia to exercise more self-criticism on historical matters.
- ▶ Fourthly, Poland appreciates Washington's support for a western perspective for eastern European countries, for example giving Ukraine the chance to join NATO as a matter of principle.
- ▶ And fifthly, Poland sees the American presence in the dialogue with Russia as a stabilizing counterweight to Russian cooperation with France and Germany in particular, which it views with distrust. Consequently, Poland is interested not just in a platform for cooperation between the European and Russia, but in a wider web of cooperation between "the West" and Russia.

However, although the Poles often conclude from the above points that there is a broad identity of interests between the United States and Poland, some observers maintain doubts as to whether Washington would be willing to risk a lasting deterioration in its relations with Moscow if tensions increased between Poland and Russia. Also, the hard line on Belarus pursued by Washington is not necessarily in Warsaw's interests, because the Poles would like to avoid any escalation in its eastern neighbor. And finally, skeptics point out that ultimately Brussels rather than Washington will be able to give Poland effective backing for its economic interests in Russia and other countries of eastern Europe.

### **Poland, Germany, and the East**

Although they are both members of the European Union, Germany and Poland view the European Union's eastern partners from extremely different positions.

- ▶ For Poland, developments across its eastern border are a matter of vital importance. Eastern policy considerations

shape the fundamental goals of Polish foreign and security policy. For Germany, relations with partners in the east are also important, but they do not determine foreign policy to the same extent.

- ▶ Poland views developments in "the East" in a strongly geopolitical light, while this perspective is much weaker in Germany.
- ▶ In Poland *and* Germany eastern policy thinking revolves primarily around Russia, but while Germany sees Russia primarily as a political and economic partner, Polish Russocentrism manifests itself in a "Ukraine first" policy and in efforts to stem Russian supremacy in the post-Soviet region.
- ▶ Poland regards allowing eastern European countries such as Ukraine to join the European Union and NATO as the best protection against neoimperial tendencies in the post-Soviet region. Polish support for Ukrainian membership of the European Union has been given largely without discussion of the implications such a step would have for the dynamics of European integration, while precisely these worries about unpredictable consequences dominate the debate in Germany. Poland would like to make Ukraine a "second Turkey," whereas what a majority of Germans would like to prevent precisely that, and instead want bring Ukraine gradually closer to the Union.
- ▶ In order to prevent European Union enlargement causing exclusion, Poland would like to make its eastern border—an EU external border—as permeable as possible, a plan about which Germany and other EU members have great reservations.

These diverging strategic interests will continue to generate discord in German-Polish relations. Nonetheless, there are many points of agreement. Germany and Poland are both interested in stabilizing and homogenizing the European Union's eastern partners. Both would like to exploit the potential for foreign policy, security,

and economic cooperation with Russia, Ukraine, and other eastern European countries. Both are keen to encourage the European Union's eastern European partners to cooperate constructively with Russia, while at the same time ensuring that that process harmonizes with their closer cooperation with the European Union.

For German-Polish relations this means that the respective relationships to Russia bear the potential for new disagreements, but also for new positive stimuli. So Germany and Poland would be well advised enter into a close dialogue in the European framework about their specific relationships to the eastern neighbors. A constructive partnership in eastern policy should be made a central theme of the German-Polish agenda in the enlarged European Union and could give new impetus to the rather meager bilateral relationship. From the German perspective, a discussion and action process of this kind would have the advantage of allowing Polish expertise to flow into the efforts to consolidate the eastern neighborhood. At the same time, Germany could play a role in stabilizing Poland's relations with Russia, the Achilles heel of Warsaw's eastern policy. Neither Germany nor the European Union can have any interest in conflict-laden Polish-Russian relations.

A joint eastern policy discussion should be guided by the idea of creating a German-Polish motor to dynamize European neighborhood policy and cooperation with Russia in the European Union. Depending on the field of cooperation, the following maxims could come into play:

**European Neighborhood Policy (ENP).** Germany and Poland should become the hub of an informal coalition working to ensure that the ENP is assigned a permanent high priority within the hierarchy of objectives of the Common Foreign and Security Policy. Such a group of "friends of neighborhood policy" could work to focus ENP by defining priorities for action, develop it by concretizing sectoral initiatives, and support it through bilateral measures.

It is especially easy to imagine such portfolio-related initiatives in the fields of energy, infrastructure, justice and interior, environmental policy, democratization, civil society, EU harmonization, and administrative reform. The preparatory work could be conducted by a permanent working party from the planning staffs in the German and Polish foreign ministries.

**Russia.** German-Polish discussions about Russia require special sensitivity. It is doubtful whether Poland will become more receptive to German arguments concerning the relevance of Russia in the foreseeable future. But Germany could at least work to dispel the Polish "Rapallo trauma," by more closely integrating Warsaw in its Russian policy deliberations. If summits involving Spain, France, Germany, and Russia are held, Poland should be invited too. At the Munich Security Conference, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder said that Germany was "working with Poland towards a truly strategic partnership with Russia." This would require Poland to continue to exercise a high degree of "anger management" where historical issues are concerned. A German-Polish dialogue on Russia could then begin with joint consideration of initiatives in "soft areas," for example the research and education field of EU-Russia cooperation. Here a possible change of government in Warsaw could turn out to represent a great challenge, because the conservative parties that look set to govern from fall 2006 demand a harder line on Russia. They will also follow the motto of "good relations with Russia, but not at the price of the truth" (as journalist Krzysztof Gottesman put it), so they are unlikely to allow today's cooperation to be divorced from the controversies over the past.

**Ukraine.** Germany and Poland should intensify their dialogue over Ukraine. Such an exchange of views has already been initiated in the form of consultations, for example over the Action Plan, and will continue in meetings of the two foreign ministers with their Ukrainian opposite number. This format could, guided by the



priorities for action, also be applied to other fields. The two countries should concentrate on implementing the Action Plan, which represents a timetable with medium-term targets for developing closer relations between the European Union and Ukraine and identifying a model for association that would function as an attractive incentive for reform in Ukraine. The question of EU membership should remain unaddressed for the moment. Meetings of German, Polish, and Ukrainian members of parliament or parliamentary committees could be established on the model of the Polish-Lithuanian-Ukrainian Parliamentary Assembly. Setting up a German-funded chair or faculty at the European College of Polish and Ukrainian Universities in Lublin would be a first realistic step toward creating a beacon of trilateral cooperation in eastern Poland.

**Belarus.** The central concern in Polish-German discussions on Belarus should be the search for effective forms of support for civil society structures and democratization initiatives. In the current situation (and looking ahead to the presidential elections scheduled for 2006 in Belarus) Germany and Poland should discuss how the blend of pragmatic cooperation at the lowest level, selective sanctions in agreement with the European Union and international organizations, and cautious support for NGOs can be fine-tuned. Here it would be particularly important to provide alternative sources of information and to strengthen civil society actors. At the same time, Germany and Poland should think about how the European Union could react to the different possible medium- and longer-term developments in Belarus. The suggestion made by Polish experts of beginning work now on an EU-Belarus action plan should also be taken up in this connection.

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