

Is Poland still committed to the Eastern neighbourhood?

Natalia Shapovalova and Tomasz Kapuśniak

>>> During its current EU presidency, Poland aims to reinforce the EU's engagement with its Eastern neighbourhood. Yet many in Kyiv and Tbilisi believe that Warsaw's 'reset' with Russia has been undertaken at the expense of Poland's relations with Ukraine, Georgia and other Eastern Partnership (EaP) countries. They fear Poland is losing interest in its Eastern partners.

Examining Poland's Eastern policy, we conclude here that there is little evidence that Warsaw has either diminished its interest in or changed its goals towards its Eastern neighbours. Warsaw continues to support the latter's democratisation and integration into the EU and NATO. But the style and instruments of Poland's policy have changed as the country increasingly channels its Eastern policy goals via EU structures and takes larger member states' interests into account.

Europeanisation has thus become a new factor in defining Poland's policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood. This works in two directions. On the one hand, Poland increasingly adapts its national foreign policy to EU demands. Prime Minister Donald Tusk's policy of improving relations with Russia was partly driven by the need to strengthen Poland's position within the EU. Poland also now adheres to the EU mainstream when it engages in the EU's Southern neighbourhood. Examples include former President Lech Wałęsa's visit to Tunisia, Tusk's trip to Libya, and the appointment of the Plenipotentiary of the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs for the Union for the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, Poland successfully uses EU structures to further its national policy goals and concepts, thus benefiting from

HIGHLIGHTS

- Poland's Eastern policy is Europeanising: Poland adheres to EU foreign policy priorities and promotes its Eastern agenda at the EU level.
- The Russia-Poland 'reset' has brought limited results in bilateral relations, but has strengthened Poland's role in EU policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood.
- Ukraine's importance for Poland has not diminished, but the country's domestic developments complicate the strategic partnership.
- Moldova and the South Caucasus are gaining new importance for Poland in the context of the Eastern Partnership.

»»»»» the Union's broader power in the world. The setting up and development of the Eastern Partnership and Poland's policy towards Belarus are good examples of such 'bottom up' Europeanisation. The two trends are symbiotic: the projection of Poland's national priorities towards the East onto the EU level has been possible due to Warsaw's more cooperative adherence to EU objectives in its relations with Russia and the Southern neighbourhood.

A LONG ROAD TO EUROPEAN INFLUENCE

Among the countries of Central Europe, Poland has attached a special importance to relations with its Eastern neighbours since the 1990s. Poland's foreign policy was primarily focused on integration into NATO and the EU in that decade, but good relations with neighbouring countries, in particular in the East, also featured among its priorities.

The idea of establishing an EU policy towards the region's Eastern neighbours came from Polish think-tanks and decision-makers. At a meeting inaugurating Poland's accession negotiations in 1998, the then Polish foreign affairs minister called for the establishment of the Eastern dimension of the enlarged EU. In 2003, Poland proposed a strategy calling for increased EU engagement with the region. It advocated differentiating the EU's relations with its Eastern neighbours (Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia) depending on their respective interest in such cooperation and their progress in democratisation and adherence to EU values. The central role was given to Ukraine which, according to the authors of the strategy, was not only to take a similar place to that of Russia in EU policy, but also to become a member state in the future.

However, the concept of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) outlined in 2003 was fundamentally different from the Polish proposal. The focus on the East was diluted by

including the Southern Mediterranean region in the same policy framework and the ENP sidelined the issue of membership. Only in 2008 did Poland for the first time manage to include its own concepts into the EU's foreign policy. Acting jointly with Sweden, the Polish government proposed the creation of the EaP, a new policy initiative for six countries in Eastern Europe.

This was accompanied by the improvement of Poland's relations with Russia as a result of the pro-European and pragmatic policy of Prime Minister Tusk's government. A 'reset' of bilateral relations has not solved the most long-standing problems, such as the disputes over history, different views on the post-soviet neighbourhood or the high price for Russian gas. But this rapprochement has strengthened Poland's position within EU decision-making. Poland-Russia relations have increasingly become a more normalised part of EU-Russia relations. While Poland opted for an EU approach towards Russia, the EU supported Poland in trade disputes with Russia and accepted Poland's leadership in the EU's policy towards its Eastern European neighbours.

POLAND'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

Poland's strategic goal is the democratisation and Europeanisation of the Eastern neighbourhood. It is often said that Poland does not want to be a frontier country of the EU. This is true in the sense that Poland considers Europe's unification as a guarantee of peace on the continent and its own security.

Traditionally, Poland has been more focused on Ukraine and Belarus due to stronger historical ties and a common Slavic heritage, and to a lesser extent on Moldova. The South Caucasus has not been a part of Poland's regional activity.

The EaP and its partner countries (particularly Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia) are

priorities for Polish development assistance. This assistance has doubled since Poland's accession to the EU, reaching €27 million in 2011. Through its aid, Poland supports democracy and good governance initiatives, migration and border management, rural and agricultural development, and entrepreneurship.

Apart from bilateral aid, Poland is actively involved in the EU's Eastern Partnership projects. Along with Central European member states, Poland has become a pioneer in the multilateral structures of the EaP by organising multilateral seminars (for example, on anticorruption and mobility) and sharing its expertise. In the European Parliament delegation to Euronest, 11 out of 58 members are Poles. In Ukraine, Poland has been active in offering its experience and advice through EU-funded twinning projects, successfully competing against the 'old' member states more experienced in this initiative.

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represented the EU in the Eastern neighbourhood.

During its EU presidency Poland will host an EaP summit in Warsaw, and has also planned a number of other activities. The EaP Business Forum will be inaugurated in Sopot on the Baltic Sea coast. The third annual meeting of the EaP Civil Society Forum, in Poznan, will last longer than usual ostensibly to ensure the more effective impact of NGOs. Poland envisages a number of meetings in a 27+6 format, involving ministers in different policy areas such as transport, health and agriculture. Multilateral meetings are planned with the heads of statistics offices and customs services. Poland advocates stronger EU support for

democracy in the neighbourhood. Since 2003, Poland has promoted the idea of a European Democracy Fund to support civil society actors. In 2011, this idea received the support of the Commission and the European External Action Service in the ENP review - though some member states remain cool towards this proposal.

Nonetheless, some Polish analysts still maintain that their country's engagement in the East is insufficient, given the significance of the region in Poland's foreign policy. They point to the small number of students from EaP countries and Poland's relatively limited aid to and economic impact in the neighbourhood. Polish investment in Ukraine, the main recipient in the region, is \$893 million, which is only 2 per cent of all foreign investment to the country. Poland is among the top five destinations of Belarusians and Ukrainians studying abroad, but attracts few students from other EaP countries.

UKRAINE AND BELARUS: CORE CHALLENGES

Ukraine has been the centre-piece of Poland's policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood. In the early 1990s Poland established a strategic partnership with Ukraine and has promoted the country's integration into the EU and NATO. This partnership has not been easy given the ups and downs of Ukraine's democratic transition and its foreign policy U-turns. Former Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski was the only Western leader to visit Ukraine during its international isolation in the later Leonid Kuchma era. In 2004, during the Orange revolution, Kwaśniewski led international mediation efforts. After the revolution, Poland tried to convince other EU member states to offer Ukraine the prospect of accession.

However, Ukraine's domestic developments have complicated Poland's mission. First, the 'Orange' pro-European government was torn apart by personal conflicts and did not deliver

»»»»» on promised reforms. Then, the 2010-elected president Victor Yanukovich reversed even those limited democratic achievements that had been implemented. With unfortunate coincidence, during the first visit of Polish President Bronislaw Komorowski to Ukraine, the constitutional court annulled changes made to Ukraine's constitution in 2004, thereby re-strengthening presidential powers.

Following the latest changes of presidents in Warsaw and Kiev, Polish-Ukrainian relations are not as close as in the past. High level political contacts have diminished since the time of Lech Kaczyński and Victor Yushchenko, who reportedly met over forty times during five years, both compensating for their lack of contact with Russia. Victor Yanukovich has not been particularly keen on deepening Ukraine-Poland strategic relations. Instead, he invested primary diplomatic effort in raising Ukraine's profile in Brussels, Berlin and Paris, as well as with Russia and China. He paid an official visit to Poland only a year after his inauguration, in February 2011.

These developments have provoked media talk of 'Ukraine fatigue' in Poland. Notwithstanding the cooling of relations, this is an exaggeration. No other country in the EU has such an enduring interest in Ukraine or invests so much political capital in promoting Ukraine in the EU.

Poland has not changed its strategy towards Ukraine, but rather its tactics. Given the enlargement fatigue in the EU - particularly due to opposition from France and Germany - Poland has focused on the need for Ukraine to improve its practical short term relations with the European Union - while referring to Treaty Article 49 as a long-term factor. Such pragmatic priorities include finalising the EU-Ukraine talks on the Association Agreement and free trade, visa free travel and increased EU aid.

Poland's relations with Belarus' authoritarian regime are limited and Warsaw's leverage on Belarus is miniscule. Poland has used the EU to

pursue its goals, above all that of encouraging Belarus' democratisation and its linkages with Europe. Belarus was included in the EaP's multilateral track, while extension of the EaP bilateral benefits was subject to Belarus' progress on democracy. Before Belarus' elections in December 2010, the Polish and German foreign ministers travelled to Minsk to offer President Lukashenka €3 billion of EU aid in exchange for a free vote.

After the crackdown against the opposition in Minsk, the EU was obliged to return to a policy of sanctions. In addition, Poland restricted travel for Belarusian power-holders, provided asylum for many of the persecuted opposition and civic activists, and increased support to non-state actors. In 2011, €5.5 million, or one fifth of all Polish aid, will go to Belarus, mainly for democracy assistance projects. Lukashenka accused Poland (and Germany) of fomenting a *coup d'état* in his country and launched new sanctions against Polish-minority NGOs and journalists in Belarus. The problem of the Polish minority in Belarus has increasingly become an EU problem.

Poland is one of the strongest advocates of a visa free travel regime for EaP countries. The introduction of a visa regime between Poland and its immediate neighbours in the East after the former's EU accession, and further restrictions as a result of Poland's accession to the Schengen area, have created the risk of a new 'curtain' falling across eastern Europe. When the EU Council discussed the issue of introducing a visa free travel regime with Russia in 2010, Poland insisted that the EaP countries should be treated equally.

Among EU member states, Poland has the largest consular network in Ukraine (six general consulates) and in Belarus (three). The latest was opened in April 2011 in Sevastopol, becoming the first consulate of an EU country in Crimea. Meanwhile, the Polish consulate in Lviv is the largest in Ukraine; it issued a record number of 300,000 visas last year.

In 2011, Poland, along with the Czech Republic and Slovakia, abolished national visa fees for Belarusians in order to support civil society. Warsaw argues that similar steps should be taken at the EU level, along with increased EU support to civil society in Belarus. In the case of Ukraine, fees for national visas have been lowered from €35 to €20.

MOLDOVA AND THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

Moldova and the South Caucasus countries have played a secondary role in Poland's Eastern policy, since they are not Poland's immediate neighbours. Poland's interest in the region increased following its EU accession. In 2003, Moldova was included in Poland's strategy on the Eastern dimension as a country that should have a prospect of accession. Poland has also consistently brought the EU's attention to the problem of Transnistria, a separatist region of Moldova. Bilateral contacts with Chisinau have grown since 2009 when the Polish government supported the democratic change in Moldova as the Alliance for European Integration gained power.

In the South Caucasus, Poland has been more focused on Georgia and Azerbaijan. This region is important for Poland's energy security. Georgian and Azerbaijani energy companies are part of the 'Sarmatia' consortium along with Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian companies. The consortium has a long-outstanding (and somewhat moribund) plan to build a continuation of the Odessa-Brody pipeline to the Polish city of Plock to transport Caspian oil to Europe. Poland's concern has increased that the South Caucasus is prone to conflicts and insecurity. During the Russia-Georgia war in 2008, it was feared that Russia's Georgian strategy would be a direct threat to Poland. Poland's relations with Georgia were very close during the presidency of Lech Kaczyński. He travelled to Tbilisi, along with leaders from the

Baltic States and Ukraine, to support President Saakashvili during the Russian-Georgian war. Under new president Komorowski, Poland's policy towards Georgia has changed in style, but not in essential substance. Warsaw supports Georgia's integration into the EU and NATO, but relations with Tbilisi are now not built at the expense of those with Russia, Germany or France.

Armenia has been the least important state for Poland, due to Yerevan's orientation towards Russia and its lack of a strong EU ambition. Armenia was the last EaP country where Poland opened an embassy.

Since 2009, Poland's relations with the South Caucasus and Moldova have been increasingly driven by the EaP and are likely to intensify due to Poland's leadership in this policy. In March 2010, President Tusk visited all three South Caucasus countries in the first official visit of a Polish prime minister. In July 2011, when Poland assumed its EU presidency, President Komorowski made a six-day visit to the South Caucasus to promote the EaP and bilateral contacts with all three countries.

Moldova's importance for Poland is growing since the country is a current 'success story' in the EaP, which is otherwise somewhat short of achievements given the background of democracy backsliding in the region. In March 2011, the Polish prime minister made an official visit to Moldova for the first time to participate in the EU-Moldova Forum financed by the Polish government.

CONCLUSIONS

Poland's interest in the Eastern neighbourhood is long-term and strategic. Poland aspires to the democratisation of Eastern European countries and their integration into European structures. These goals are rooted in Polish history, while Poland benefits from its membership in the EU and NATO to promote their cause at a European level.

»»»»» Contrary to many fears expressed in the last two years, the ‘reset’ with Russia has not diminished Poland’s commitment to the Eastern neighbourhood. Poland continues to support Ukraine’s and other Eastern European countries’ accession to the EU. However, in the absence of EU-wide support, it focuses on the short-term measures of the EU agenda with these countries, such as advancing with free trade, visa free travel and enhanced funding for civil society. Bilaterally, Poland is increasing its aid to the Eastern neighbours and working to increase people-to-people contacts. Warsaw is boosting its engagement with Moldova and the three South Caucasus countries as their commitment to reform is crucial for the success of the Eastern Partnership.

The example of Poland’s recent foreign policy evolution shows that keeping good relations with Russia does not necessarily entail less engagement with or support for the democratisation and European integration of

the Eastern neighbourhood. In fact, Poland’s increasing engagement in the East and ‘reset’ with Russia go hand in hand: as Poland has become a less abrasive EU partner, ‘old’ member state antipathy towards its designs in the eastern neighbourhood have diminished.

Natalia Shapovalova is researcher at FRIDE

Tomasz Kapuśniak is assistant professor at the Institute of East-Central Europe in Lublin and lecturer at the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin.

**e-mail: fride@fride.org
www.fride.org**
