

Poland and Spain: Partnership for a Stronger Europe

PISM–FRIDE

The European Union of today is being significantly challenged by the ongoing economic crisis and doubts about the future of the European project. In this moment of trial, the main response of the European countries should be to create a more united and stronger Europe. Therefore, the EU needs genuine advocates of both further integration and greater solidarity amongst EU members.

Poland and Spain are perfectly suited to their roles as the most vocal defenders of a strong EU. They share the experience of democratic transitions intrinsically linked to their engagement in European integration and are the clearest examples of the benefits that come with EU membership. Their status as two of the six largest EU Member States gives them a valuable position to influence the debate on the future of the EU as well as introduce proposals for treaty changes.

The governments of Poland and Spain, elected in autumn 2011, enjoy ideal momentum to seek enhanced cooperation and are able to effectively face the challenges affecting the EU. They share an ideological affinity, and the simultaneity of their mandates gives them the necessary stability for policy planning over the next few years. Their joint commitment to a more integrated EU as a proper response to the challenges the bloc is facing could be a solid base upon which to build a pivotal bilateral partnership.

There are six fields where Poland and Spain could enhance their relations: leadership in Europe, the economy and finance, neighbourhood, migration and borders, EU global relations, and security and defence.

Leadership in the EU

While it is clear that Poland and Spain have been the most important beneficiaries of decisions regarding European integration, they need to be much more pro-active to increase their role as decision-makers. If they want to shape the debate in the EU and influence the decision-making processes in EU institutions, it will be essential for them to present joint initiatives and enhance their coalition-building capabilities. Both countries could lead discussions on how to address the problem of a democracy deficit, especially when it comes to the breach between European citizens and policy-makers (on both the national and European levels). Importantly, they could engage more visibly in influencing crucial EU policies in such fields as economic development in the EU, competitiveness, neighbourhood policy, external relations, migration policy and border management.

Jointly, Poland and Spain could gain more leverage in proposing changes to EU treaties. The governing parties in both countries could also use their relatively strong positions in the largest political group in the European Parliament (EP)—the European People's Party—to propose joint projects and promote candidates for influential posts in the EP. In this context, it will be beneficial if both governments foster the joint involvement of centres of analysis and think tanks with outstanding expertise to elaborate on innovative and feasible ideas aimed at strengthening the European integration process.

For both partners, close cooperation with France and Germany, surely the most influential actors in shaping the direction of European integration, will be indispensable. Nonetheless, both governments could seek out joint efforts and create initiatives on their own to complement and balance Franco–German leadership when necessary. The Polish and Spanish governments should make use of their proven record as pro-integration countries and cooperate with other important members on specific issues. Overall, both partners could strive for more cooperation among the six largest countries, for example, by promoting regular meetings at the ministerial level.

Economy and Finance

The economic downturn and recovery process certainly will be at the top of the European Union agenda. Although, Spain and Poland have been affected differently by the crisis, they could develop a dialogue and seek common initiatives on economic governance, anti-crisis mechanisms, and growth-generating programmes. While Spain's negotiating power has been strongly weakened by its deep economic problems, Poland—although reinforced by the positive experience of its EU Council presidency and planning to join the eurozone in a few years—has limited tools to participate in all discussions about the future of the monetary union. Although individually constrained by their particular positions, by working together both partners could be more effective in making their voices heard in the EU.

The persistent economic difficulties in the region will strongly influence the negotiations on the next EU Multiannual Financial Framework (2014–2020). While both governments will be able to cooperate on supporting effective cohesion and common agricultural policies they will have to better interact on their specific positions on EU financial resources and their distribution and management. It will be important in both countries to understand the challenges deriving from Poland's economic needs and Spain's changing status in the EU (in particular, becoming a net contributor to the common budget), given the fact that the latter country has frequently been considered a model for the former. Therefore, Poland may at some point face Spain's present concerns and experiences, so it would be valuable to talk about solutions to these challenges now. For example, it would be worthwhile to raise the question of how to combine efforts aimed at stimulating economic growth and improving competitiveness. Another important problem to be considered will be ideas and solutions for the problem of how to design policies aimed at increasing the use of technology and innovation in both countries while Europe is working to overcome the economic crisis.

Neighbourhood

Poland and Spain share the quality of frontier/peripheral states of the EU. With respect to their preferences for neighbourhood relations (the South for Spain and the East for Poland), they share similar general concerns because both need a stable and developing neighbourhood. Transformations in North Africa and continuing concerns over the situation in Belarus and Ukraine give an important base for the Polish and Spanish governments to discuss their roles and find adequate measures in relation to these neighbours. It would be beneficial if they were to promote mutual engagement in the Eastern Partnership and the Union for Mediterranean. Both governments could also cooperate on the question of sharing their democratic transition experience with countries undergoing political changes. If they did, they could influence the debate on the role of the EU in promoting democracy and human rights.

Triggered by the so-called “Arab Spring”, significant interest in promoting democratic norms and political, institutional, and good management standards in the EU neighbourhood through the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) led it to be one of the top issues on the EU agenda last year. The high interest in these concerns may not last long, however. Concentrating on the economic crisis in Europe as a guiding factor in decisions regarding the EU agenda and overlooking the indispensability of an active and effective approach to the neighbourhood may lead to the political and financial collapse of the ENP, and therefore poses a real risk that outside instabilities would affect the EU. It will be indispensable for EU members for whom the ENP is of special importance to unite efforts to keep the EU’s constant attention on the neighbourhood. Poland and Spain together could champion efforts aimed at securing adequate funding for the ENP as a vital tool for the EU in contributing to the development of neighbouring states.

Migration and Borders

The context of an economic crisis and a turbulent situation in the neighbourhood (especially in the South), combined with demographic changes in EU countries, has significantly increased the importance of migration and border-management challenges. Poland and Spain’s geographic locations make them vital actors in the EU in addressing these issues, keeping in mind the different specifics of each partner. Poland still has a marginal amount of foreign immigration, but its attractiveness to non-EU migrants could potentially intensify in the near future. Spain could be a valuable partner to draw on for its experience and best practices on migration and border-related issues. Bilateral dialogue should include such topics as how to improve the EU institutional and financial framework for managing immigration, tackle illegal immigration and human trafficking, foster integration programmes for foreign migrants, and cooperate with third countries. Other issues concern the means of monitoring migration flows, targeting new unlawful methods that attempt to validate illegal immigrants, and the impact of country-specific tools (e.g., local external border traffic and temporal job permits in Poland’s case).

As for external borders, both countries have complementary knowledge to share, though for Spain, maritime borders and airspace control is more relevant, while for Poland, the land border is most at issue. Also important, potential lay in discussions on how to improve control over irregular immigration and migrant trafficking networks inside the Schengen area. The UEFA Euro 2012 matches, organized in June in Poland and Ukraine, would be a valuable opportunity for the Polish government to invite relevant Spanish representatives to observe border flow and management during an event organized by an EU and non-EU country.

EU Global Relations

Both governments could also be more active in shaping the debate on European foreign relations. Although, the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy is an exponent of the EU common voice, Catherine Ashton’s record shows how difficult it has been for her to be engaged significantly in all the areas that are her responsibility. Consequently, the EU Member States retain a vital role in addressing nationally certain areas. Obviously, the top-down approach of building the European External Action Service (EEAS), with the High Representative as its head, will not succeed if not supplemented by the bottom-up efforts of EU members to seek more coherence on what the common agenda should look like and what should define the EU as a global actor.

Poland and Spain may contribute to the discussions on the development of the EEAS and the role of the national diplomatic services. Both countries are able to engage in considerations of the EU's future role in international relations, in particular the formula for strategic partnerships. While the U.S. appears to be the obvious special partner for the EU and also a close partner for Poland and Spain, there is a need to interact on relations with Russia as an important EU neighbour. It would also be valuable if both countries include in their bilateral dialogue discussion about the implications of the rise of new powers (China foremost) on their own policies as well as on the EU as a whole.

There is also unexplored, but considerable potential for bilateral dialogue on the basis of their privileged position in certain areas of foreign relations: Eastern Europe for Poland, and Latin America for Spain. The exchange of experience and knowledge about these relations could significantly improve the capacity of both countries to jointly influence the formulation of EU policy in these areas. It is recommended that the Polish and Spanish Foreign Ministries elaborate on a bilateral secondment programme for young diplomats so they could improve their expertise and interest in the foreign-policy priorities of the partner country.

The special place Belarus and Cuba occupy in the foreign policies of both countries could be a valuable base for the two governments to engage jointly in EU efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom in authoritarian regimes. The European Endowment for Democracy would bring attention to the Polish–Spanish dialogue as a valuable democracy-promotion tool, one legitimized by the transition experience of both countries. Despite rather divergent priorities for international engagement outside the EU, Poland and Spain could serve as an exemplary case of dialogue that is aimed at seeking a greater convergence and coherence of interests in the process to make the EU a crucial global actor.

Security and Defence

While specific security threats are to a large extent different for Poland and Spain, the basic premises of both states' security policies remain the same. They support equally a strong NATO and the development of an autonomous security and defence policy by the EU, including its specific capabilities. For both countries, the U.S. is a key ally in dealing with security challenges in the European and transatlantic area. With these general affinities, they should explore the potential for developing cooperation on security and defence issues.

Both governments should first discuss the challenges for NATO, with the main focus on the issues atop the agenda of the May 2012 NATO Chicago Summit. These would concern such problems as the challenges for ISAF operations in both the short- and post-2014 timeframes as well as the general outlook for the future of NATO's operational engagement. Both governments should also share their views of the future of the Alliance, especially, in the context of the redefinition of U.S. security priorities. An important topic for cooperation will be Ballistic Missile Defence, not only because Spain recently allowed some elements of the system to go ahead and Poland is planning to host some components but also in the wider context of NATO–Russia relations. The Polish and Spanish governments also could analyse the emerging Smart Defence initiative and could seek support for including some joint proposals under that concept.

As for cooperation in the EU, it would be valuable if both countries were to focus on the future of the Weimar CSDP initiative, presented last year by the Polish government during its presidency of the EU Council and supported by Spain (along with France, Germany and Italy). Both governments could also exchange experience about their engagement in research

and technology projects conducted within the European Defence Agency under the new pooling and sharing initiative.

Implementation

The most important tool for confirming mutual commitments and developing an enhanced dialogue would be the annual intergovernmental Polish–Spanish summits, which are well-established and form a valuable platform ever since Poland joined the EU. The next such meeting, scheduled for 12 April in Warsaw, should be used to discuss specific issues of common interest and strategic importance. In order to increase the visibility of and foster public interest in Polish–Spanish cooperation, it is highly recommended that every one of these meetings be concluded with a joint declaration highlighting key topics of mutual importance.

Given the prominence of economic issues, it would be valuable if both governments would consider establishing a separate Economic and Financial Bilateral Dialogue, which could be held every year to gather high-level representatives of the governments and relevant national institutions to work on improving mutual understanding and, ideally, to find viable measures and solutions that could turn into persuasive initiatives in the EU. In order to address the importance of relations with the EU's neighbours, the Polish and Spanish governments could establish a bilateral EU Neighbourhood Dialogue that would gather the representatives of relevant government bodies and third-sector experts, e.g., NGOs active in neighbouring countries of concern.

An important base for enhancing bilateral dialogue would be a better framework for people-to-people contacts. Commercial links that develop a more dense business network should be incentivised by the governments of Poland and Spain, for example, through the internationalisation of companies. They could also look for more efficient ways to boost mutual engagement amongst SME's. On specific projects, there could be elaborated bilateral platforms for entering specific markets where one of the partners has more of a presence (the eastern partners for Poland, and Latin America and North Africa for Spain).

One indispensable way to foster mutual interest would be the intensification of contacts among intellectuals from both countries. There are two valuable platforms that could be used for that. First, is the *Pro Futuro* forum, inaugurated in June 2011, under the honorary co-presidency of Aleksander Kwaśniewski and Javier Solana. At least once a year (in Poland or Spain), the initiative could gather prominent and respected opinion-makers from both countries for public debate on issues of mutual interest. Another prospective platform may be an annual roundtable of Polish and Spanish experts, including young leaders active in politics, business, academia and NGOs. The first step in developing that idea was the Polish–Spanish seminar organised on 8 March in Madrid by the Polish Embassy in Spain, PISM, and FRIDE. A roundtable such as this would debate selected topics related to European integration and vital to both countries. The conclusions of each seminar could be included in a recommendation paper that would be presented to both governments following the meeting.¹

¹ This Strategic File is a joint contribution of PISM and FRIDE and follows the expert seminar “Poland and Spain: cooperating in a Europe of challenge” organized on 8 March 2012, in Madrid by the Polish Embassy, PISM, and FRIDE. The main contributors to this publication are, especially, Bartłomiej Znojek, as well as Richard Youngs, Cristina Manzano and Beata Wojna. The document is also being published as “food-for-thought” on the eve of the 8th annual Polish–Spanish Ministerial Summit, which will take place on 12 April 2012, in Warsaw.