

# BULLETIN

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Editors: Marcin Zaborowski (Editor-in-Chief), Katarzyna Staniewska (Executive Editor),  
Jarosław Ćwiek-Karpowicz, Beata Górka-Winter, Artur Gradziuk, Roderick Parkes, Beata Wojna

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## **Towards a New North-South Axis: Poland's Cooperation with Czech Republic and Slovakia**

Dariusz Kałan

*At a political level, Poland's relations with the Czech Republic and Slovakia are reasonably strong, and a range of common projects in energy, infrastructure and the economy points to their high potential. In the public debate, however, its neighbours to the east and west receive far more attention. Building contacts at all levels to its southern neighbours will be key if Poland wishes to supplement the usual East-West line of its foreign policy with a new North-South axis.*

Poland's relations with the Czech Republic and Slovakia are not burdened by serious historical problems, nor by the sensitive issue of national minorities. Moreover, they have long lacked real geoeconomic and geopolitical significance. This certainly makes them less politically loaded than relations with Poland's eastern and western neighbours—Ukraine, Belarus, Russia and Germany—but it also gives them at best a marginal place in public discourse.

The recent emergence of a stronger North-South orientation in Poland's foreign policy suggests that things are changing. Early in 2011, President Bronisław Komorowski paid a visit to Prague, followed five months later by Prime Minister Donald Tusk and five members of his government. In 2012, the presidents of Poland and Slovakia met each other three times.

These meetings still lack a proactive rationale. The cross-border nature of trade barriers, energy infrastructure, and transport links makes cooperation between the three neighbours necessary. But this is also politically desirable due to the broader reinforcement of the Visegrad Group (V4) and the emergence of a new North-South axis in the geopolitics of the region.

**Trade Contacts.** One reason for the revival of political relations with its southern neighbours is the growing profile of both countries in Poland's trade balance. In 2011, the Czech Republic jumped to third position as the main recipient of goods imported from Poland (about 6.2% of all Polish exports). The volume of exports to the Czech Republic has gradually increased from €2.6 billion in 2004 to €8.4 billion in 2011. At this rate, it may overtake Great Britain (€8.7 billion in 2011) and become the second-largest recipient of Polish goods in the medium term.

As for Slovakia, in 2011, Polish companies sold it goods and services worth €3.3 billion. Slovakia also provides an example of steady growth (from €2.8 billion in 2008). This compares favourably with Poland's trade relations with larger states, such as Hungary (€3.5 billion), Ukraine (€3.4 billion) and Romania (€2.1 billion). The high ranking of the Czech Republic and the rising profile of Slovakia among Poland's main trade partners may be explained by good cooperation between small and medium-sized businesses, geographic proximity as well as a lack of economic barriers.

**North-South Gas Corridor.** Poland's energy cooperation with the Czech Republic and Slovakia is largely focused on the natural gas sector. In the energy mix of the three countries, gas imported from the east plays a crucial role: for Slovakia (98%), Poland (62%), and the Czech Republic (59%). The three have thus made it a flagship project to build the North-South gas corridor, covering the development of gas-transport interconnectors between the liquefied natural gas terminal in Świnoujście in Poland and the Croatian island of Krk. This will facilitate the diversification of energy sources as well as the integration of regional transmission networks.

Important elements of the corridor include direct energy connections joining Poland with the Czech Republic and Slovakia. They will also become part of a new southern transit network

(the so-called Southern Corridor, which includes Nabucco West), transporting gas from the Caspian Sea area and the Middle East. By the end of the decade, Poland should have two equally effective southern interconnectors, so that gas supplies will be fully protected in emergencies, and the possibility to freely trade gas on regional markets will also be secured.

**Cooperation in Infrastructure and Border Areas.** Although energy connections are being strengthened, most cross-border infrastructure remains underdeveloped. Particularly urgent is the issue of rail connections. Major routes have fallen foul of the large investments required, whilst local-transborder routes have been gradually eliminated in recent years. The most advanced project is the Gdynia/Gdańsk–Warsaw–Prague–Ostrava line, which would be adapted to accommodate trains capable of speeds of up to 200 km/h. To meet a planned deadline in 2015, both the E65 railway-line section of Warsaw–Gdańsk–Gdynia as well as the Silesian line (Zawiercie–Katowice–Zebrzydowice) will be modernised in parallel.

As for the road system, the construction of the A1 motorway, started in the 1970s, which will link Gdańsk with Gorzyczki on the Czech border and extend the D1 highway (Brno–Ostrava–Prague), has been delayed due to financial and administrative difficulties. Moreover, the D3 motorway in Slovakia faces similar obstacles, especially the crucial section Žilina–Zwardoň. Only the pan-European “Via Carpathia” road project, which will link the Baltic countries with the Eastern Balkans and Greece and also run through the territories of Poland and Slovakia, seems to be developing smoothly.

If these infrastructure projects are going ahead at all, it is because Poland is eager to create a North-South transport axis between the southern border and the Baltic Coast that is crucial for the Polish economy. With these connectors in place, the turnover of Polish seaports can increase greatly. It is a strategy reflected also in the S3 expressway (Świnoujście/Szczecin–Lubawka), which is the main axis of the Central European Transport Corridor.

**Conclusions and Recommendations.** The joint energy, infrastructure, and economic projects carried out today show that the Czech Republic and Slovakia may become even closer partners for Warsaw, supplementing the usual East-West line of Poland’s foreign policy with a new North-South axis. Geopolitical changes in the last few years, which include the Arab Spring movements, the intensification of the EU integration process in the Western Balkans, the emergence of new energy routes and the rising power of Turkey, suggest that in the long run greater attention will be paid to the central-southern part of the continent, which nowadays is much more likely to seek rapprochement with the EU than many of the eastern neighbours. To the north, too, economic growth in the Scandinavian states and recovery in the Baltic states only adds to the interest created by transport and energy developments in the Arctic.

For Poland it is, hence, crucial to enjoy not only a strong position amongst big EU players, but also to have behind it a group of small and medium-sized countries equally interested in increasing the potential of Central Europe, understood as an area between the Baltic and Adriatic Seas, and acting as a coordinator of cooperation in the North-South line. There is already an important and effective tool of activity in this area, the Visegrad Group, which should become the heart of a new axis, since all V4 members—for historical, political and economic reasons—give weight to common engagement in the North-South direction, but also within the EU. The new line is, therefore, complementary to the usual East-West orientation. After all, gaining a better understanding of its regional partners will allow Warsaw to build multi-tasking coalitions in the EU as well as to keep Ukraine close to the EU, since there are no other countries so much interested in Ukraine as the V4 states.

The development of relations with southern neighbours, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, is a fundamental step to reinforcing the new geopolitical line with Hungary and beyond. The two states, like Poland, are emerging well from the financial crisis, which, when coupled with the increasing interest of rising powers like China, may result in rapid growth in the economic attractiveness of the region. Common projects in energy and infrastructure provide a good basis for this cooperation; however without a greater public debate and better political understanding it is unlikely that their potential will be fully exploited. Poland should make efforts to build-up these spheres of collaboration as well as to maintain the favourable dynamics of its political contacts. In order to further deepen these relations, it is recommended a joint session of parliaments or governments be organised in formats that have not yet been convened.