



BULLETIN

No. 73 (526), 4 July 2013 © PISM

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France and Poland: Four Grades of Cooperation on EU Neighbourhood Policy

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The general thawing of relations between France and Poland may herald better bilateral cooperation regarding the thorny issue of European neighbourhood policy (ENP). Four grades of cooperation are there for the taking. Beyond the question of how best to combine the eastern and southern dimensions, compromise might be found via a shared institutional set-up, with technical solutions improving the implementation of ENP, and knowledge-sharing exercises between the two geographical dimensions.

François Hollande's presidency has reinvigorated Polish–French cooperation, and European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has fallen within its scope. Warsaw is seeking the support of Paris for the further development of the Eastern Partnership, notably on the eve of the third Vilnius Summit, which will take place in November 2013. The future signature of an association agreement with Ukraine was discussed during President Bronisław Komorowski's visit to Paris (7–8 May), whilst in 2012 ministers of foreign affairs Radosław Sikorski and Laurent Fabius debated the Eastern Partnership and European Endowment for Democracy (26 July).

This marks a breakthrough in terms of diplomatic contact: until now, Poland and France, major players in developing the eastern and southern angles of the ENP respectively, have found little common ground. The inter-governmental Union for the Mediterranean, initiated by Paris in 2008, was met by a response from Poland in the same year, presenting a proposal for an Eastern Partnership, their initiative drawing upon the EU institutions. The division of the neighbourhood budget between the east and south has subsequently proved a divisive issue for the pair, not least with the spending boost following the Arab spring. The two have been at loggerheads over the question of democratisation too. For Poles, democracy as a condition, and the “more for more” rule are seen as crucial for preparing eastern partners for EU membership in the long term, while France fears that strong conditionality will impede EU relations with the south.

Signs of a Shift. The prospects of rapprochement on ENP remain mixed. On the one hand, the general premises of the French position have not undergone dramatic change. France has traditionally been reluctant about strengthening EU competences in the neighbourhood, preferring to take a lead role in inter-governmental relations. It remains active in bilateral politics in the region, as shown by numerous diplomatic missions to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya in 2012 and 2013. And it has reinvigorated the 5+5 dialogue, an inter-governmental forum for security, migration and trade-related issues that gathers major players from the EU's south and the western Mediterranean. EU institutions are only observers in that process, and, tellingly, France does not engage much in political processes related to the future of the ENP on the EU level. It was relatively inactive in the Westerwelle reflection group on the future of the EU, and does not have a central role in the European Global Strategy, both of which are forums of high interest for Poland. France is also against enlargement-style conditionality, advocating instead a development-based approach.

On the other hand, some shifts are perceptible. Although France is still focused on the southern dimension, its perception of the east has slightly altered. Unlike its centre-right counterparts, the French Socialist Party is hesitant about relations with Russia, meaning that it will have few quibbles about seeing the Eastern Partnership develop. Initial

bilateral contacts confirm a slow-down in the relationship with Russia—Hollande's visit to Moscow in February ended with medium-scale projects such as a research centre on high-speed trains supported by SNCF, whilst Sarkozy and Medvedev concluded major strategic contracts such as the Mistral deal. Nevertheless, France has significant economic problems and a high trade deficit (€65.8 billion in 2012), but it is focusing on developing trade relations with southern countries, and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements are foreseen with Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia at the EU level. Since similar processes are taking place in the Eastern Partnership, French and Polish policy-makers are likely to encounter similar technical problems with the implementation of those agreements.

Irrespective of their political priorities, money has always been a sticking point. However, Member States compromised on the Multiannual Financial Framework in February, agreeing that the neighbourhood budget ought to increase by around 40%. Since France and Poland seem to accept that two-thirds of finances will go to the south and one-third to the east, financial debates might now be secondary. In this context, it is again the technical issue of the effectiveness of EU expenditure that will preoccupy both sides, given the woeful absorption of ENP funds. Hollande is clearly interested in the better use of EU funds, given his support for a "Mediterranean of projects." A reinvigorated Union for the Mediterranean, co-chaired by the EU High Representative since March 2012 and managed by a technical secretariat is attracting funds for huge projects in areas such as energy, environment, water sanitation, and research cooperation. Hollande has created new domestic institutions including an inter-ministerial delegation under the prime minister and an inter-ministerial mission for the Mediterranean, in order to ensure the development of relevant projects at EU level.

Conclusion and Recommendations. Under these circumstances, four grades of cooperation on ENP are possible. The most ambitious would see political agreement between France and Poland, to differentiate the two geographical dimensions of ENP. A more cautious but no less impressive step would see the pair agree on a shared institutional set up for the whole ENP. Failing clear political agreement, however, technical issues related to the increase of policy effectiveness could form a base for cooperation. And at the most modest level, knowledge-sharing exercises between the institutions of the south and the east might be encouraged.

First, then, the pair might "agree to disagree" on ENP. The EU's attempts to apply similar approaches to the southern and eastern neighbourhoods derive in large part from competition between eastern and southern Member States: when one side has made a proposal for its chosen region, the other has demanded the equivalent. A more holistic approach may shortly replace this competition, based on a shared commitment to the whole neighbourhood and a readiness to differentiate between the two geographies. Other Member States are after all sceptical about the global strategic importance of the neighbourhood. In order to secure scarce EU political and financial resources for the neighbourhood, Paris and Warsaw may well have to join forces. Poland has already shown some interest in the southern dimension, making numerous bilateral visits after the Arab Spring, supporting the French position on Syria at the EU level, and sending a 20-person team to provide technical support to the French intervention in Mali. France, in exchange, can support Polish and Lithuanian efforts related to the third EaP Vilnius summit and ensure relevant participation in high level meetings.

Failing this kind of coordinated differentiation, the two countries might look for shared institutional solutions to strengthen ENP as a whole. The right power-balance between the European Commission and the EEAS would have to be found if Poland's preference for enlargement-lite is to be reconciled with French reticence about strengthening EU competences. France might support maintaining the Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy in the 2014 Commission, whilst Poland might keep its calls for politicisation and more democracy-oriented financial assistance to a minimum.

In the absence of this kind of political agreement, a focus on more neutral technical issues could be considered. Today, France and Poland have a tendency to 'name and shame' technical failures of EU policy in the opposite region, in order to prove that their own initiatives are more successful. In the context of scepticism about the value to the EU of focusing on the neighbourhood, it would be more sensible to cooperate on shared technical issues. These include the effectiveness of EU financial assistance, ways to ensure further implementation of DCFTAs, the increase of funding for youth exchanges, and ideas about how to increase the visibility of EU policy in the region. To this end, France and Poland should exchange views on the eastern and southern dimension experiences frequently, as EU policy encounters similar problems in both regions to some extent.

At the most modest end of the cooperation scale, a knowledge-sharing exercise with the involvement of neighbours (policy-makers, officials, experts, CSOs and businesses) would enable a bottom-up approach in preparing policy updates. With the field of security and defence being of high interest for Poland and France, such initiatives might include making experts and officials from neighbouring countries eligible to enter the European Security and Defence College in Brussels, and the establishment of a "Military Erasmus" as advocated by the French presidency in 2008. The Eastern Partnership can also follow the good practices of the Union for Mediterranean in terms of attracting external funding for projects - for instance the InfraMed Infrastructure Fund, or the cooperation with World Bank. Small and Medium-Sized Enterprise instruments are also better developed in the south than in the east. The Facility for Euro-Mediterranean Investment and Partnership and the Euro-Mediterranean Development Centre for Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises could be a source of inspiration as well. As for the UfM, it might consider how the sustainability of different formats of official and civil society organisation cooperation is ensured by EaP Civil Society.