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European Sovereignty

Commentary on the Findings
of the Survey in Poland

EUROPA



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EUROPEAN SOVEREIGNTY AS MULTIPLIER OF NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY

In Polish political language, there are no other terms used more frequently that evoke such unambiguously positive emotions as 'independence' and 'sovereignty'. This stems from the lasting historical memory of Poles regarding their tragic collective history. I am referring here to the experience of a country that used to be a European geopolitical power between the 16th and 18th centuries, a country that disappeared from the map of Europe at the end of the 18th century. The 123 years without its own statehood; colonisation by Russia, Germany and Austria and the independence uprisings suppressed violently still resonate in the language of politics, culture and the collective understanding of patriotism in Poland today. Also, the events of the Second World War are, to this day, a source of widespread and cross-party national trauma. The attack by Nazi Germany on 1 September 1939 and by the Soviet Union 16 days later resulted in the annihilation of the new state, which had been associated with generational hopes. Furthermore, the atrocities committed against the civilian population by two totalitarian regimes, the most extreme and anti-human dimension of which was the Holocaust, are an important component of family histories and recollections, fears and anxieties. In addition, the almost half-century-long presence of Poland in the Soviet sphere of influence is, especially in the right-wing part of society, an important basis for glorifying the right to self-determination, as well as to pursue its own independent policy, both domestically and abroad. The perception of national sovereignty has

profoundly changed with Poland's accession to NATO in 1999, and to the European Union half a decade later. By joining the political, economic and military West, Poland has increased the sense of its own security, the sustainability of its state structures and the visibility of necessary reforms that have strengthened the country over the past 32 years. Against this backdrop, Poland's geopolitical success story is often contrasted with that of its neighbour, Ukraine, which did gain independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, but failed to take advantage of the historical opportunities of Europeanisation and the creation of lasting alliances that would guarantee its independence and sovereignty. The Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014 and the detachment of Crimea are prime examples. The notion of 'European sovereignty' is therefore viewed in Poland as an element of a 'multiplier' for national sovereignty which wards off the threat of attack from outside and forms the basis of a source of funding for those policies and reforms aimed at catching up with the West. The one in question is especially Germany which, because of its geographical and cultural proximity, is a real point of reference for millions of Poles.

UNION OF MANY CRISES

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic represented yet another crisis with which the European Union has had to struggle in recent years. During each of these crises (economic, debt, migration and the pandemic), Poland pursued as sovereign a policy towards Brussels as possible, often us-

ing independent instruments. In 2015, Poland and other Visegrad Group countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary) refused to execute in the European principle of relocating refugees and economic migrants, explaining this with security reasons and concerns about the cultural maladaptation of the Muslim population to these European countries. Similarly, in 2020, seeing the rise of COVID-19 in Western and Southern Europe, Poland quickly closed its borders and imposed a strict lockdown to avoid mass infection during the first wave of the pandemic. With regard to this, the right-wing Law and Justice [PiS – Prawo i Sprawiedliwość] government began to use the narrative that Poland, unlike most of the European Union, reacted more quickly, more efficiently and that Polish aid programmes for companies could serve as a model for the countries of the 'old European Union' to follow.

The topic of 'European sovereignty' returned with redoubled force during the discussion of purchasing COVID-19 vaccines via the European Union. At first, both the government and the opposition in Poland assumed that in negotiations with global pharmaceutical corporations, 'bigger is better'. However, with the cessation of deliveries of contracted vaccines, and the announcement that individual member states were planning to negotiate new purchasing terms with the companies on their own, it became apparent that faith in Brussels' causative power to make things happen was seriously undermined both by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and his government ministers, but also by many journalists representing a broad ideological spectrum. The lack of a swift and firm reaction from the European Commission and the uncoordinated actions blocking the attempt to export vaccines produced in the Union outside its borders were explicitly criticised by Polish public opinion. This was a visible symbol of the weakness of the European Union in a clash with non-state actors in the international arena.

EURO-ENTHUSIASTS AND PATRIOTS

In Poland, the relationship between 'national sovereignty' (83%) and 'European sovereignty' (75%) is visible. Similarly, support for Poland's presence in the EU (89% of surveyed Poles [CBOS, 2020]) is not at odds with the visible patriotism factor in Polish society (71% of surveyed Poles feel pride in belonging to the Polish nation [CBOS, 2018]). This – one could think – apparent dualism of social identity can be for instance interpreted through the modernisation factor. In principle, all political parties present in Polish parliamentary life do not question the positive impact of Poland's presence in EU structures. This is due, among other things, to the broad stream of EU funds, which have changed Poland beyond recognition. We can particularly see this in the national infrastructure, the increase in wealth, but also in the opportunities for better-paid jobs throughout the European Union. The slogan 'Strong Poland in a strong Europe' used by the Polish social democrats in charge of the 2003 accession referendum has apparently become the motto of the vast majority of Poles who share the belief that an economic revolution and an immense increase in the quality of life would be impossible without the EU.

FEDERALISATION? NO, THANKS.

A problematic aspect, however, is the matter of Poland's participation in the further process of federalisation of the European Union. The key aspect here is the attitude towards the Euro currency. Two thirds of Poles are attached to their national currency, which may also be interpreted as a reluctance to expose the national economy to the risk of a slowdown, as was the case with Poland's neighbours. I am referring here to Slovakia and Lithuania which, after joining the euro zone during the crisis, faced not only a decline in GDP growth, but also a visible increase in the prices of essential products. An additional factor in the desire to strengthen national sovereignty in Poland may also be the ongoing political and legal dispute between Warsaw and Brussels, which has continued incessantly since PiS came to power in Poland. Rule of Law, women's rights and LGBT rights are all topics presented by the Law and Justice political camp and the public media as a form of exerting unauthorised and extra-Treaty pressure on the Polish government from the side of the European Union. This interpretation is particularly appealing to the right-wing segment of the electorate, which is still the largest group in Poland, although the electorates of other parties also display a certain reserve towards Brussels' actions.

During the years 2015–2017, the topic of 'imposing' EU quotas in the European relocation of refugees was an additional anti-federation factor. This was related to the terrorist attacks carried out by groups linked to ISIS. Over time, however, this topic has become less and less politically salient, especially due to the pandemic and the prevailing travel restrictions in Europe. In this context, it is also worth noting that recently as many as 77% of the surveyed Poles believe that their country should support those fleeing from their homeland because of war or persecution in solidarity (Kantar, 2021). However, it may be assumed that it is not at all about helping refugees from the Middle East and North Africa. This result should be read more in the context of showing solidarity with Ukrainians and Belarusians, who, especially as of late, have had to face increased repression by the regime of Alexander Lukashenko.

POLAND NEEDS A UNION (IN THE EAST)

One visible area where Poland is nevertheless ready for more coordinated and decisive action from the European Union and strengthening of 'European solidarity' is the Eastern policy. After the de-facto division of the Eastern Partnership and the visible decrease in the activity of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy in the area of the EU's eastern neighbourhood, Poland now relies exclusively on the Baltic States in its attempts to increase EU activity in this area. The recent crisis in Belarus and the political and military dispute between Russia and Ukraine represent a real geopolitical challenge for Poland. Two of Poland's neighbouring countries are in a state of military conflict, while a third is using harassment against representatives of the Polish minority. The arrest of the president of the Union of Poles in Belarus Angelika Borys and the Polish-Belarusian journalist Andrzej Poczobut not only represents international humiliation for Poland, but is also a symbol of the actual violence per-

petrated by Alexander Lukashenko's regime against Poles living in Belarus. On its own, without the help of Brussels, Warsaw is unable to exert effective pressure on Minsk. The weak reaction of the Union to documented and well-known violations of human rights by the Belarusian authorities gives the impression that the EU is a power only on paper. The need for the Union to increase its geopolitical significance is therefore connected to the desire to implement its own national Polish foreign policy. This also applies to the approach towards the Russian Federation, whose authorities have repeatedly shown that they do not respect the West, particularly the European Union. The poisoning of Alexei Navalny and his prompt arrest on his return to Russia are treated in Poland as a show of arrogance towards Europe. In addition, the implementation of the Nord Stream 2 project, which presents a real threat to energy supplies for Poland, the Baltic States and, above all, Ukraine, is regarded by Poles as an example of a combination of cynicism and naivety, both on the part of Germany and the other countries and companies of the 'old European Union' involved in the project.

JAROSŁAW KACZYŃSKI CAN BE SATISFIED

The president of the Law and Justice party, who is the actual leader of the Polish state, after reading the study analysed here, should be pleased with the implementation of his illiberal reforms. Despite the violation and circumvention of the Polish Constitution, the gradual strengthening of executive power at the expense of the judiciary and the legislature, and the takeover of successive institutions, Poles continue to perceive the Union not so much as a community of values, but as a guarantor of economic and geopolitical security. However, the results of a survey stating that 75 % of the surveyed Poles are in favour of 'European sovereignty' may be used by the Polish right wing to carry out its policy in a pragmatic manner in its relations with the EU. Strengthening the Eastern European policy, greater military cooperation (both within the EU and NATO), deeper economic cooperation in the recovery after the coronavirus crisis are postulates that may resonate with public expectations. The European Union may also treat these proposals as a 'bargaining chip' in its relations with Poland. There are no indications that PiS will lose its hegemonic position on the Polish political scene in the coming years. There are more than two years left until the constitutional date of the parliamentary elections, a time during which Brussels will have to cooperate with the Law and Justice government, and this time should be used in the most pragmatic way to strengthen 'European sovereignty'.

CONCLUSIONS FOR PRO-EUROPEAN PROGRESSIVE FORCES IN POLAND

Recent votes in the Polish Parliament have shown that the opposition forces are extremely divided. The Civic Platform, which belongs to the EU's largest political family, the European People's Party, abstained from the vote when the Sejm ratified the Reconstruction Fund. In pursuit of its 'anti-PiS' policy, it was prepared to banjax this necessary programme for the whole

European Union. It is therefore difficult to see this organisation as a credible, pro-European partner for the future. The Polish left, in this context, behaved much more responsibly by voting with Law and Justice on this important issue for Europe. Social democracy has managed to push for the allocation of 30% of the resources from this fund to local authorities and the creation of a committee to monitor the spending of EU funds, a significant proportion of which is to be used to help local (powiat) hospitals and the construction of public housing. The progressive forces in Poland should, however, take a critical approach to the study results analysed here. The public seems to regard the EU as a generous sponsor which, for historical reasons, should finance projects to westernise the Polish economy. Unfortunately, the political sphere still lacks a deeper understanding of European solidarity as well as the philosophy of functioning within a single organisation. The European Union is indeed a community of values that unite nation states in the exercise of difficult policies on a global scale. The day will come when Poland itself may become a net contributor of aid to other countries. Then, without appropriate political education from an early age, it may turn out that Polish Euro-enthusiasm is based solely on an economic basis.

Polish progressive and pro-European forces should not shy away from analysing the necessary boundary conditions for the federalisation of the Union. The current structure of the Eurozone, which is a monetary union without a fiscal base, poses a particular threat to Poland. Entering the common currency combined with the semi-peripheral nature of the Polish economy and its strict dependence on EU funds presents a real threat. The discussion about 'European sovereignty' in a progressive version may involve increased balance between the European east and west. Efforts to converge living standards, incomes, social security, quality of public services and strengthening social dialogue (also with Western, private companies operating in Poland) may bring a truly westernising factor to the reforms. While Poland politically and legally entered the European Union in 2004, without the construction of a truly European, democratic society in which employees will be able to have a good night's sleep with a sense of social security, it will be impossible to actually introduce the Union to Poland.

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