

Analysis

Polish-Russian Relations in the Context of the EU's New Eastern Policy

By Cornelius Ochmann, Moscow

Summary

The Polish people's experience with Russian and Soviet hegemony has pushed the country to advocate a more robust stance against Russian foreign policy. This legacy spurred Poland to take an active role in Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and has also given rise to Warsaw's demand that the EU should adopt a new approach towards the countries of Eastern Europe.

Poland's policy toward Eastern Europe involves more than simply building on the EU's foreign policy to Russia. Special emphasis is given to the integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, as well as the Caucasus and Central Asia. These assertive features combine with the Polish government's interest in diversifying energy supplies and reducing the country's dependency on Russian gas and oil deliveries.

Poland's views are not necessarily in synch with the rest of Europe. In order for the EU to implement the eastern dimension of its Neighborhood Policy effectively, the entire EU must ratify the EU Constitutional Treaty or at least sign its institutional aspects into law – a fundamental prerequisite for concerted action on the part of the EU 27. As a result, the Polish government will have to rethink its current stance and adopt a more pragmatic position if Poland is to continue to play an important role beyond the EU's eastern frontiers.

EU Member Poland Wields Veto Power

Since 1 January 2007, the EU has had to coordinate and shape the foreign policies of 27 member states. This difficult task is the responsibility of the EU Presidency, which rests with Germany in the first half of 2007. One of the goals pursued by the previous Finnish Presidency was the initiation of talks with Russia over renegotiating the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and Russia, which expires in November 2007.

However, the Polish government has vetoed this step, thus preventing the symbolic beginning of talks on the occasion of the EU-Russia Summit on 24 November 2006 in Helsinki. Though the Polish veto may have been an important and justified move, it came as a surprise to all parties involved and caused dismay on the part of Warsaw's EU partners. In Berlin in particular, where the upcoming EU Presidency and the federal government's as-yet unconfirmed "New Eastern Policy" strategy were still being discussed, the Polish veto was registered with incomprehension. Thus, the existing misunderstandings and open questions in German-Polish relations were compounded by an unresolved issue of great strategic importance to both countries as well as the rest of the EU.

On the other hand, in view of the ongoing domestic disputes in Russia over President Vladimir Putin's successor and Russia's opaque energy strategy, one may question the shrewdness of the Finnish-German efforts to conclude a new partnership treaty with Russia as early as 2007, i.e., on the eve of Russian parliamentary and presidential elections.

Historic Reasons for Polish-Russian Tensions

The particular animosity that Poland directs towards Russia grows from the shared history between the two countries. Events beginning with the Soviet Union's attack on Poland on 17 September 1939 have left deep imprints in the memories of the Polish people. The attitudes of several generations of Poles towards the Soviet and Russian state were strongly influenced by the murder of thousands of Polish officers at Katyn in 1940. The Russian side has still not identified the perpetrators and held them responsible for the massacre. The visit of then-Russian president Boris Yeltsin to Poland in August 1993 and his acceptance of Poland's NATO accession contributed to a détente in relations between the two states. However, the president's "spontaneous comment" accepting Poland's membership in NATO was subsequently "properly parsed" by his advisers and the ensuing conflict over Poland's NATO membership overshadowed the two countries' relationship until 1999.

It would be untrue, however, to say that it is only the Poles who entertain phobias about Russia. There are just as many prejudices on the Russian side about Poland. Furthermore, President Vladimir Putin has done Russian-Polish relations a disservice by introducing "Unity Day" on 4 November, commemorating the expulsion of Polish troops from the Kremlin in 1612, as a replacement for the Soviet-era 7 November holiday marking the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution. While only 8 percent of Russians polled were aware of the meaning of the holiday, more than 50 percent of respondents in Poland regarded it as an anti-Polish holiday.

Historical awareness is much more acute in both of these countries than in Germany, for example, with notable differences in the respective perceptions of the Second World War in Poland and Russia. The majority of Poles perceived the Red Army as an occupying force, while most Russians regarded it as a liberating army. These diverging perceptions have given rise to tensions, conflicts, and differences in their respective views of history that endure until today. Even in recent years, there have been diplomatic spats over “spies” in diplomatic representations, beatings of Russian diplomats’ children in Warsaw, and beatings of Polish journalists in Moscow. Furthermore, Poland continues to support the construction of a US defense shield against intercontinental missiles – a decision that Russia regards as evidence of an antagonistic stance. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s visit to Warsaw in October 2006 did not bring a breakthrough in the tense bilateral relations.

Russia’s View of Polish Support for Ukraine

Recent history also played a prominent role in Poland’s obstruction of the EU negotiating position on the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The power shift in Ukraine in December 2004 marked the failure of the Kremlin’s policy of establishing alternative structures to European integration in the post-Soviet space. Specifically, the mission of former Polish head of state Aleksander Kwasniewski to Kiev has not been forgotten in the Kremlin. The results of the Ukrainian parliamentary elections and the resulting cohabitation of the political elite are clear indications for the EU that Ukraine will continue to lean towards Europe, not Russia.

Poland had an important role both in shaping the transformation in Kiev and in challenging the EU to risk a new approach towards the Eastern European states. This has been registered in Moscow, where the Veterinary Department was immediately authorized to send a signal to the Polish side by banning selected Polish agricultural imports. Certainly, the Kremlin does not prepare elaborate campaigns for such measures. Instead, policies may be the outcome of a process where certain interest groups manage to assert themselves within the jungle of bureaucracy, and the ban on imports of Polish meat should be considered a case in point. The Russian Veterinary Department also has offices in other EU countries and monitors the quality of the agricultural goods that they export to Russia. However, Polish sources claim that the objectionable meat imports were not from Poland, but from India, and that the shipping papers had been forged to discredit Polish meat producers. Regardless

of whether the import ban was justified or not, the economic damage to Poland is limited because the meat-producing industry has found other markets in the EU. It is notable, however, that a year later, the EU Commission has still not raised the matter during consultations with Russia, as the Polish government has requested several times.

Diverging Energy Interests

Even though the media coverage in Brussels and Berlin focused on the meat ban, Poland was much more interested in energy issues. Poland’s refusal to renegotiate the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement should therefore not be reduced to the topic of meat exports. German diplomacy can be expected to convince the Russian government to lift its meat embargo towards Poland. But even if Poland is very likely to waive its veto against a mandate for new negotiations with Russia, the EU Commission as well as the German EU Presidency will have to take into account the possibility that if Polish energy policy interests are violated, the Polish government will again respond with a veto.

In recent weeks, Russia has once again shown the EU that it follows its own particular interests when it comes to energy policy. The construction of the German-Russian Baltic pipeline, where only German and Russian companies are involved, is regarded in Warsaw as being contrary to Poland’s interests.

The strategy of the current Polish government under Jaroslaw Kaczynski is to secure new energy sources for the country. The acquisition of the Mazeiku oil refinery in Lithuania by Polish energy corporation PKN Orlen, which beat out its competitor Lukoil from Russia late last year, should be seen in the context of these developments. Subsequently, the pipeline that had supplied the refinery was shut down by the Russian side and declared to be in need of service. This means that supplies can only be brought in by rail. A mysterious fire on the eve of the sale raised further questions. All of these factors are raising the cost of production for Orlen as the undertaking becomes more and more of a financial liability, and a new conflict is germinating in the Polish-Russian relationship.

Poland is more dependent on Russian gas and oil imports than Germany. So far, all Polish governments have tried unsuccessfully to diversify energy deliveries. The Polish government has not yet responded to an offer by German Chancellor Angela Merkel to promote the construction of a connecting pipeline between the German and Polish gas distribution infrastructures. This proposal has met with criticism from some politicians in Warsaw, who say that the gas deliveries would

still be of Russian provenance. No consideration appears to have been given to the fact that the deal would establish a mutual dependency and would include the possibility of accessing Germany's strategic reserves, which were created during the Cold War as stockpiles to cover the country's energy needs for several months. The Polish side would prefer German companies to develop an interest in extending the Polish-Ukrainian pipeline from Odessa to Brody, which could secure a supply of Caspian oil for the European market.

The disruption of oil deliveries via the "Druzhba" pipeline during the Belarusian crisis at the new year has given new urgency to discussions about the security of energy deliveries. It was the conduct of the Russian leadership, not the interruption itself, that destroyed Russia's already damaged reputation as an energy supplier both in Poland and in Germany. Should Gazprom decide to apply the same takeover strategy in the case of the Polish-Russian "Europol Gaz" joint venture that it used towards Ukraine and Belarus, a severe crisis would inevitably ensue. The German federal government might consider making a proposal in this case to inform the Polish public in concrete terms how Germany and the EU could support Poland with oil and gas deliveries in case of an emergency.

The Interests of the EU and Russia in the Post-Soviet Space

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier will be able to count on no more than partial support from Poland for his approach of "Change through Integration" in dealing with the EU's eastern neighbors, which he presented to the EU partners on the eve of the German EU Presidency. As far as the Polish side is concerned, this strategy favors Russia too much. Poland's interests dictate that policy towards the eastern neighborhood must by necessity consist of more than just a common EU foreign policy geared towards Russia. Despite these objections, however, Poland is quite pleased with some elements of the EU approach, namely the closer integration of Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, as well as the Caucasian and Central Asian states. The linkage between these regions and the EU's sphere of interest showcases the real shared interests of Poland and Germany in the post-Soviet space.

There is reason to doubt, however, that Russia will acquiesce to the EU's engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia. The Russian Foreign Ministry as well as the Kremlin have so far signaled that Russia regards the entire post-Soviet space (not including the Baltic states) as its own sphere of influence. Furthermore, there is currently no expert close to the

government in Moscow who would argue in favor of Russian-European cooperation in the Caucasus or Central Asia. The key question is therefore how Russia will deal with the processes of democratization in the Southern Caucasian and Central Asian states in the future. For Moscow, having lost Ukraine, it is currently a matter of paramount importance to be able to offer the states of the post-Soviet space and their political elites new, stable concepts for economic, political, and societal cooperation. The recent tensions concerning energy deliveries to Belarus and Azerbaijan indicate that there will be no politically motivated special deals for the CIS states and that Russia has switched to selling energy to the highest bidder. The post-Soviet era of subsidized energy policy in support of political allies is over.

Germany has been encouraged for months by many, though not all of the EU countries to wrap up negotiations with Russia by the end of its EU Presidency. On the other hand, some of the new EU members that border Russia and whose outlook has been shaped by negative experiences with their neighbor argue that it would be better to wait until after the Russian parliamentary and presidential elections before concluding new treaties with Moscow. Poland is at the forefront of this group.

In shaping its relations with the eastern neighboring states, the EU should take into account the extent of their commitment to democratic principles. In the future, the EU will therefore need to devote itself more diligently to the process of democratization in its neighborhood than has hitherto been the case. Besides maintaining official relations with the respective governments, it will be essential to foster civil society actors more strongly. The EU requires flexible funding in order to be able to support democratization processes in an unbureaucratic manner. Europeans should not leave it to US NGOs to accompany these social upheavals, as the long-term outcome would be US dominance coupled with a loss of credibility for the EU. This process is already under way, and the only way for Brussels to define a coherent policy so far has been to offer the prospect of EU membership to the countries in question. It remains an open question how such processes will play out in countries that have no immediate perspective of joining the EU. Poland and other new EU members can and will play an important role in this context.

New forms of integration must transform the general rejection of EU accession into support for an association of democracies in the post-Soviet space. This should be the guiding principle of the EU's "New Eastern Policy". Association can be defined in a purely

functional manner and should not initially encompass a promise of full EU membership. In the context of social transformation processes, issues such as freedom of travel, student exchanges, and trans-border infrastructure are more important than assurances of membership that would certainly not find sufficient support among the EU's citizens at the current time.

Prospects of a New Eastern policy for the EU and Poland's Contribution

The EU is in need of a blueprint at several levels. On the one hand, the goal is to ensure the freedom of action of a reforming and expanding EU that should not be jeopardized by overstretch. On the other hand, the EU must preserve the security and stability of the continent. It may be useful to offer different forms of association and partial membership in various areas. The Schengen Area and the Eurozone are functioning examples of differentiated integration and should be developed further.

A new eastern policy for the EU must first of all take into account the potential capability of pan-European integration. It demands that the entire EU ratify the EU Constitution or at least implement its operational part, which would be an indispensable prerequisite for giving the EU of 27 members the capability to act at all. The Polish government will have to reconsider its current stance on this issue and adopt a more pragmatic approach if Poland is to continue playing an important role beyond the EU's eastern borders in the future. In the absence of institutional reform, the instruments for pursuing effective foreign policy are lacking. The German Presidency's proposal for a new "Eastern Policy" will have to take into account Moscow's changing foreign policy in the context of the EU's dependency on energy. Germany is in favor of concluding a new treaty with Russia that includes strong signals welcoming Russia into Europe. Goals to be achieved in the middle term include the establishment of a free-trade zone; an energy partnership; close relations in the fields of research, education, and culture; and the development of closer social and human contacts. Furthermore, the proposal envisages that options be explored for closer cooperation in the

framework of European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP) – initially as part of civilian assistance measures and disaster relief, later to include joint missions of peacekeeping or stabilization troops.

Germany believes that the core element of cooperation with Russia must be in the area of energy policy. On the one hand, the country's importance for the EU's energy supply will increase further in the coming years, while on the other hand, the Russian energy sector depends on investments in new technology. Furthermore, Russia is to be integrated into an international regulative framework that defines energy security as the outcome of a cooperative partnership between producers, transit states, and customer states. The joint statement of the G8 summit in St Petersburg, in which Russia acknowledged the principles of the Energy Charter without making explicit reference to the document, was a step in the right direction. However, Russia's behavior in the current conflict with Belarus has caused an erosion of international trust in Russia as an energy supplier.

The German Foreign Ministry's proposal for expanding relations with Russia is accompanied by the offer of a "Modernization Partnership" with Eastern Europe (meaning, in this case, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine) and the Southern Caucasus. This proposal is to be supplemented by a similar concept for Central Asia. These three ideas are to form the basis for a "coherent EU eastern policy". The European Commission is currently elaborating measures to strengthen the European neighborhood policy towards the countries situated between the EU and Russia, while Foreign Minister Steinmeier has announced that the German EU Presidency will propose a strategy for Central Asia that will specify the EU's interests in its relations with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The aim of the EU's new eastern policy is peaceful, stable development featuring rule of law and democracy in the post-Soviet space for the coming decade and beyond. Poland and Germany have shared interests in this matter and will have to work together if this policy is to be successful.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

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