



Policy Brief | 04.2017

Poland and the EU: two-speed Europe would undermine the achievements of enlargement

May 1, 2017 marks 13 years since Poland and other central European states joined the European Union. What has become of the hopes and aspirations in recent years?

The Bertelsmann Stiftung speaks with Dr. Jacek Kucharczyk and Dr. Agnieszka Łada from the Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw.

May 1, 2017 marks 13 years since Poland and other central European states joined the European Union. The so-called “Big Bang Enlargement” was hailed as a milestone towards the overcoming of the cold-war division of Europe and the fulfilment of Central Europeans’ aspirations to return to Europe after the fall of communism in the region in 1989. Despite many doubts and concerns about the readiness of prospective members to accept the responsibilities

ensuing from membership, Germany’s support was crucial for the finalization of the enlargement negotiations and making enlargement a success. Thirteen years later, the division into old and new members seems to be fading away, but the European policy-crisis and radical political turn in Poland following the 2015 presidential and parliamentary elections give ground to new questions about the sustainability of the post-2014 status quo.

With its dynamic economic development, successful absorption of structural funds and record high societal support for EU membership, Poland has often been called the “best student in the class” of the 2004-2007 enlargement. Poland’s successful integration was acknowledged with the appointments of Poles to key jobs in European institutions, such as the President of the European Parliament (Jerzy Buzek) and the President of the European Council (Donald Tusk). Following the 2015 political turn in Poland, we can hear a different narrative coming from Warsaw, one where Poland wants the EU to become a “Europe of nations,” which can be understood as a step back in the process of integration. What has happened with the euro-enthusiastic Poles?

Agnieszka Łada: You are correct, a lot has changed in the Polish discourse on Europe. But, first of all, I would like to point out that despite these shifts in the official political discourse, public support for EU membership remains strong, especially in comparison to many old and new member states. Before 2015, Poland had been described as “the poster child of Europeanization” and “a green island of growth.” The country had been largely spared the post-2008 crises in the EU. Our society had the privilege to observe the developments in other member-states from a relatively safe distance. The economy has been growing steadily, even after the economic and financial crisis. In consequence, the level of satisfaction with the quality of life in 2016 was the highest in Poland since the first time it was measured in 1994. According to Eurobarometer, Poland consistently is among the member-countries in which the EU maintains a positive image. In the national polls, Polish support for EU-integration has never

dropped below 70% over the last decade, reaching a peak of 89% in 2014 and leveling at 88% in April 2017. In a recent poll conducted prior to the 60th anniversary of the Rome Treaties, only 9% of Poles would support a hypothetical exit from the EU.

Jacek Kucharczyk: I would add that “Polexit,” or withdrawal from the EU, is widely perceived as a political “hot potato” and is occasionally invoked by the opposition, which claims that it is on the “hidden agenda” of the current government. The officials in Warsaw vehemently deny these accusations, knowing how unpopular such a prospect would be in the public opinion, including among supporters of the ruling Law and Justice Party, who remain largely pro-European.

These facts notwithstanding, the Polish paradox of the enduring popularity of EU membership and the Eurosceptic rhetoric of the current government requires a rather nuanced explanation. One should note that the appreciation of the benefits of membership goes hand in hand with a growing dissatisfaction with some aspects of integration, such as refugee quotas or the adoption of the Euro, which are both opposed by a majority of the citizens. Unfortunately, as our joint research with the Bertelsmann Stiftung shows, young people in Poland are also sceptical as regards these issues, especially concerning the refugees.

To understand all these phenomena, one needs to see them from a wider perspective. The Polish national narrative regarding European integration is heterogeneous and reflects the profound political polarization of the elites and society at large. Multiple stakeholders are voicing different sets of arguments regarding the challenges facing the EU. While the government and some of its supporters would like to see the integration process partially reversed, there is a sustained pro-EU sentiment among the

opinion-making elites and backed by vibrant pro-European civil society groups.

So, to what extent is the Law and Justice party critical towards Europe? Or is this about the split between radical political rhetoric and the reality of pragmatic cooperation on the policy level?

Agnieszka Łada: First of all, one has to remember that the Law and Justice government's policy on Europe is driven by domestic political considerations rather than a consistent vision of EU reforms and Poland's place in Europe. The official position, which includes a demand for EU treaty changes, is focused on the alleged need to reduce the powers of EU institutions and "return them" to national governments. The Polish government sees the EU's problems in the expansion of the powers of intergovernmental institutions and argues for the need to reclaim the sovereignty of the nation state. They think that Brexit proved that EU integration has gone too far and there is the need to put the integration process in reverse gear. This would open the treaties to revise the EU's institutional framework. More specifically, the Polish government put forward a proposal for giving national parliaments the right to veto (and not only delay, as is now the case) European legislation.

Jacek Kucharczyk: But, let us stress it once more, these proposals, as well as the Eurosceptic narrative reasserting the primacy of national sovereignty, are primarily aimed at the domestic audience. Their aim is to show that the PiS government has its own "agenda for Europe," which differs from its predecessor's agenda. For the first time since 1989, the political discourse of the government party in Poland is presenting the EU as a threat to national sovereignty and tradition, rather than as a guarantee of peace, freedom and prosperity, as was the case under all

previous governments. It is no coincidence that the rhetoric of defending "national sovereignty" surged after the European Commission decided to launch "a probe" concerning the government's controversial actions on the Constitutional Tribunal, and was aimed at the domestic audience. In a similar vein, the Polish government tried and spectacularly failed to block the re-election of Donald Tusk for the President of the European Council. Once again, domestic political considerations prevailed over the need to effectively promote Polish interests in Brussels.

The Polish government has declared its opposition to the idea of a multi-speed Europe, despite the fact that this model seems to be merely a reiteration of the current state of integration, with groups of member states more closely cooperating in certain areas, such as Schengen or the Monetary Union. Why is Poland afraid to accept this as both a fact of life and a way forward for Europe?

Jacek Kucharczyk: Indeed, the concept of a multi-speed Europe occupies an important place in the ongoing debates in Poland and is perceived with strong misgivings. The Polish government and the opposition share the view on the need to secure the inclusive nature of further European integration in specific policy areas. Nobody disagrees with the fact that we already have different speeds of integration. There is, however, the fear that if it will be an official, adopted, agreed – or whatever you call it – method of integration, we will end up with the reality of a two-speed Europe, or – to put it more bluntly - a core Europe and its peripheries. It would undermine the goal of enlargement, namely the reunification of Europe. I think that both sides of the current Polish political divide are aware that under this scenario Poland would likely end up in the periphery. And that is what nobody in Poland wants.

But, following this line of reasoning, one might think that it is entirely up to Poland to decide whether to be part of the core rather than the periphery?

Agnieszka Łada: Of course it is. In order to avoid such a scenario, Poland should join the Eurozone. This would put Poland at the heart of the integration process and prevent its marginalization from the policy-making process. Unfortunately, neither the current government nor the opposition want to push the Eurozone perspective or even seriously debate this issue. The reason is very simple – the majority of the society is against the introduction of the euro, as people are afraid of rising prices and the potential costs of helping Eurozone member countries in financial trouble. Some of them believe that the Polish economy will grow more quickly outside of the Eurozone. The fact is that there has never been a good information campaign on what the euro would mean for Poland and its society – both economically and politically. But politicians are not courageous enough to put this issue on the agenda.

So, what, in your opinion, can and should be done on the European level to help the EU get through the current crisis?

Jacek Kucharczyk: In our opinion, which is shared by many Polish experts, the EU should focus on completing the projects that had already been started, primarily in such areas as asylum policy, border security or cooperation against terrorism and corruption. The community method should remain in the heart of the efforts to further European integration, which should proceed within the current institutional framework. Rather than chasing the specter of “democracy deficit,” pro-EU politicians should make sure that Europe delivers what it promised to its citizens. At the same time, there is a need to significantly upgrade EU

communication with the citizenry in order to effectively challenge populist and eurosceptic “post-truth” narratives which demonstrated their destructive power in the run-up to the Brexit referendum. Last, but not least, for Europe to be successful in navigating through the crisis, the EU needs to be both assertive and consistent in insisting that all member states respect its core values and principles, such as democracy and the rule of law.

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