

WESTERN BALKANS IN POLAND'S FOREIGN POLICY

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Background

The Western Balkans have never been a particularly important region in Poland's foreign policy. After the fall of communism in 1989, successive democratically-elected governments were focused on confirming Poland's security by safeguarding its integration with NATO and the EU. Since the attainment of these goals in 1999 and 2004 respectively, Poland has focused on the promotion of democratic values in the countries of Eastern Europe which—just as the Western Balkans—remain outside the Euro-Atlantic structures. The Western Balkans are not in the immediate vicinity of Poland and hence the armed conflicts that took place there in the 1990s and the resulting unstable political situation in the region have not constituted a direct threat to the security of the country. Poland's historical and economic ties with Balkan countries are not as elaborate as, for instance, in case of the partners from the Visegrád Group, which means that Poland's bilateral relations with countries in that part of Europe are naturally less dynamic.

However, security and a stable political and economic situation are a priority for NATO and the EU, as regards the Western Balkans. In connection with Poland's membership in both these structures, the above are also reflected in Polish policy towards the region. In addition, this area, which shares all of its land borders with the European Union, has since 2003 been a priority direction of EU enlargement. It is also significant that the Polish society has for years been

clearly supporting a further enlargement of the EU, with approval expressed by 69% of respondents, which places Poland (along with Slovenia—70%) in the forefront of the EU (the EU average is 44%). As regards individual Western Balkan countries, Polish support is around a dozen percentage points higher than the EU average [3].

Poland's membership in Central European regional forums—the Visegrád Group (V4) and the Regional Partnership—plays a crucial role in the Polish policy towards the Western Balkans. As the area is of significant importance for the foreign policies of Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic (as well as Slovenia and Austria, participating together with the V4 countries in the Regional Partnership)—the policy guidelines of these groups include the development of cooperation with the Balkan countries.

Objectives of Poland's Policy towards the Western Balkans

The primary objective of Polish foreign policy, i.e. to safeguard the state's security, has to be examined in a broader context of the European security. In principle, Polish interests in the region do not go beyond enhancing the security and stability of the political and economic situation through the integration of the Western Balkan states with NATO and the EU. Poland consistently supports the „open door policy“ with respect to both NATO and the EU. Alongside security-related issues, Polish support for the integration aspirations of the Balkan countries is also connected with its policy towards the countries of Eastern Europe and South Caucasus.

The Western Balkans have in recent years been a priority region in the EU's foreign policy, and the countries lying in this part of Europe are now the only ones with a real prospect of membership (except for Western European countries, such as Iceland). Probably as a result of the Western Balkans' growing importance on the EU forum, issues connected with the region occupied more space—for the first time ever—in the government's information on the tasks of Polish foreign policy for the year 2007 [10]. On the other hand, the authorities were declaring at the time the need for a greater Polish involvement on the „North-South“ axis, so the governments led by PiS kept signaling a greater interest in the Balkans. In a speech by Foreign Minister Anna Fotyga on the challenges of the European Union from the Polish perspective, the Western Balkans were indicated on the first place in the context of creating a stable, predictable and peaceful environment outside the EU [17]. Although these declarations were

not followed by more dynamic Polish policy towards the region, they have nonetheless been noticed by foreign experts [18].

After the change of government—despite the fact that Poland continues to support the integration of this region with NATO and the EU—the foreign minister’s information on Polish foreign policy for 2008 mentioned the Balkan question in just a single sentence, expressing general support for „a peaceful transition and integration“ of the region [20]. In a similar information for the year 2009—dominated by policies resulting from the implementation of the Eastern Partnership project—the Western Balkans were not mentioned at all [19], although during a meeting with Polish ambassadors in January 2008 the Polish prime minister underlined support for Croatia’s accession efforts and noted that Poland was committed to „a fair, clear European perspective for the other countries of the Western Balkans“.

Poland’s Policy towards the Western Balkans in 2008-2009

The involvement of Poland in the Western Balkans stems to a large extent from its membership in NATO and the EU, as well as from its cooperation in the framework of the Visegrád Group and the Regional Partnership. It is chiefly through these organisations that Poland is pursuing the objectives of its policy towards this part of Europe.

Regional Security

Poland supports the individual countries of the Western Balkans in their aspirations for membership in NATO. Thus, during the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, Poland clearly supported the accession to the organisation of all three Balkan candidates: Albania, Croatia and Macedonia. Following a negative position adopted by Greece to the question of Macedonia’s accession—which led to the latter’s lack of an invitation to join NATO—Poland invariably expresses its support for Macedonia’s membership in the alliance. This is the first case when the country that has met the conditions is not granted membership due to a veto by one of the members. From the Polish point of view, this constitutes a dangerous precedent for NATO’s „open-door policy“.

Peacekeeping missions under the auspices of international organisations are a plane where Poland’s involvement has tradition-

ally been strong in the Western Balkans. As part of the commitment of the United Nations, NATO, OSCE and the EU to security improvement in the region, Poles have been contributing to civilian missions and are a part of international military and police forces, with the size of these contingents remaining unchanged over the past years. Among the soldiers serving in Bosnia and Herzegovina within the EUFOR „Althea“ mission, there are 203 soldiers from Poland (the fourth largest of 28 contingents). This constitutes the tenth part of this entire mission. Nevertheless, in April 2009 the Polish government adopted a decision to withdraw a substantial portion of the contingent at the beginning of 2010, so only around 25 Polish soldiers will remain within the mission. This has been dictated by the Polish policy to rationalize the size of its contingents within peacekeeping mission as well as by the EU strategy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding a further reduction of the contingents within EUFOR „Althea“. In addition, a few Polish police officers are serving within the EU Police Mission in that country. In Kosovo, by contrast, 120 Polish policemen constitute one of the four main international police contingents within EULEX (previously UNMIK). Furthermore, 284 Polish soldiers have been serving within the KFOR mission under NATO command, but it has to be noted that at the NATO defense ministers' meeting held in Brussels in June 2009, a decision on a gradual reduction of the mission was adopted.

EU Enlargement

Poland is a supporter of the accession of Croatia and Macedonia to the EU. Therefore, the prolonged negotiations between Croatia and the EU—due to Slovenia's blockade related to a maritime border dispute in the Gulf of Piran [24]—as well as the delay in launching Macedonia's negotiations with the EU—resulting, as in the case of the country's NATO membership issue, from the Greek blockade—are both detrimental from the Polish foreign policy perspective. Blocking of the negotiations by individual member states constitutes a precedent that could be used in the future not only with respect to the other Balkan countries, but also with regard to the EU enlargement to the East.

Poland also supports the launching of accession negotiations with the other Western Balkan countries once they meet their designated criteria. Like most EU countries (including all new EU members), but in contrast to some Western European countries (such

as Germany, France or the Netherlands), Poland sees no need for slowing down the pace of the enlargement process in the region after Croatia's accession [4].

Independence of Kosovo

As far as the independence of Kosovo is concerned, Polish policy in this matter was consistent with the approach of most EU member states. Poland declared its commitment to develop a common position within the EU, although it had clearly favoured the final concept of separating the province from Serbia. The Polish government recognised the independence of Kosovo on 26 February 2009 as the tenth EU country, a week and a half after its proclamation by the parliament in Pristina. This decision may have been influenced by U.S. policy towards Kosovo at a time when Poland was negotiating with the latter the terms of deployment of the anti-missile shield on Polish territory.

The Polish government acknowledged that a favourable approach to the independence of Kosovo was a consequence of a realistic assessment of the political situation in the Western Balkans and „an expression of solidarity with the countries of the Euro-Atlantic community“ [21]. The Polish government stated that the independence of Kosovo would in a long term lead to an improvement of security and stability in the region. On the occasion of recognising the new state, the government reiterated its support for the integration of the Western Balkan countries with the EU, noting at the same time that the Kosovo issue had to be treated as *sui generis* and should not constitute a precedent [5]. Shortly before Kosovo's recognition, Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski informed about the suggestions of Deputy Prime Minister Waldemar Pawlak to send a political mission to Serbia to maintain a „European perspective“ for Belgrade. Although ultimately no such mission has been sent, the Polish authorities have over the years indicated that the membership of Serbia in the EU would be of great importance for stabilization in the entire region [23].

The recognition of Kosovo's independence by Poland has not led to a significant deterioration of relations with Serbia. The latter country has not downgraded its embassy in Warsaw (at that time a charge d'affaires was the head of the Serbian diplomatic post in Poland) and the Polish ambassador remained in Belgrade. The entire Polish-Serbian relations were also affected by the fact that—on the issue of Kosovo—the government's policy differed from the statements of

President Lech Kaczyński, who believed that Poland should refrain from a swift recognition of Kosovo's independence. The president claimed that this could have negative consequences for the territorial integrity of Georgia, in whose support the president has been very actively involved. The president repeatedly kept stressing—also during his visit to Belgrade in May 2009—that the recognition of Kosovo's independence by Poland took place under circumstances in which he and the government were divided on the issue.

Regional Involvement – V4 and Regional Partnership

While announcing its decision on the Kosovo question, Poland simultaneously expressed its support for both the „European“ course of Serbia and for the pro-European forces in the country, although in fact Poland has not always been seizing all opportunities to provide such political support. In April 2008 Poland was not among the signatories of a declaration initiated by France to facilitate the issuance of free visas to Serbian citizens—a declaration signed by 17 EU countries [16]. Poland did not endorse the declaration, although the European Commission was in favour and the remaining Visegrád Group countries were all among its signatories. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs argued later that Poland had been applying far reaching facilitation to the citizens of Serbia within the framework of the existing regulations [14], and Poland did not express its support for the French initiative until May 2008, when it endorsed the Joint Declaration of the Regional Partnership countries [2].

This is an example showing that Poland's functioning within Central European regional organisations mobilizes the country to adopt a more active attitude towards the Western Balkans. This applies not only to the Regional Partnership, but also to the Visegrád Group. In expert circles close to the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggestions have been made for years that responsibilities would best be divided between the Regional Partnership dealing with the Western Balkans and the Visegrád Group concerned with Eastern Europe [7]. Given the priority treatment accorded to the Balkans by Poland's V4 partners, this has never been done, and some analysts note that the exclusion of Balkan issues from the V4 agenda would have undermined the group and would have been detrimental for Poland [8].

The Western Balkans region was among the priorities of the Polish presidency in the Visegrád Group (July 2008–June 2009) [15]. However, less attention was devoted to this issue than in the previous years. Presented as the last of the five goals, it was limited

to general support for the promotion of reforms in countries of the region on their road to the EU and NATO. With regard to external issues, the Polish presidency in the V4 was focused mainly on the promotion of the Eastern Partnership.

The Polish presidency's active approach to Balkan affairs was manifested in a meeting of political directors at the V4 Ministries of Foreign Affairs with a representative of the British Foreign Office, Bosnian authorities and Miroslav Lajčák, a Slovak diplomat, UN High Representative/EU Special Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Held in Sarajevo in October 2008, it was to support a more active approach towards Bosnia and Herzegovina. This meeting enhanced the Bosnian political elites' interest in V4 cooperation experiences and indirectly supported Lajčák in his efforts for stabilization and reforms in the country [12]. The mission has been evaluated by the EU partners as a model implementation of actions taken by the EU member states. During the meeting in Sarajevo it was noted that the EU should increase the number of scholarships for students from Bosnia and Herzegovina. V4 countries allow students from this and other countries of the Western Balkans to access the International Visegrád Fund scholarship programme. The programme has been also opened for students from Kosovo, despite the absence of a common position on the Kosovo issue within the Visegrád countries [1]. Discussions also continue on the implementation of specific scholarship projects for Serbia, which alongside Belarus and Georgia remains a priority country for the operation of the fund.

It should also be pointed out that Poland, like other countries of the Visegrád Group, supported the candidature of Bosnia and Herzegovina for a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council for the period 2010–2011. Poland was initially competing for the position with this country within the Eastern European regional group, but a seat on the Security Council did not become a priority for Poland. Finally, Poland gave its backing to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Minister Sikorski informed Sven Alkalaj, head of the Bosnian diplomacy, about this decision at a meeting in New York on 25 September 2008. At the same time, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared its support for Poland should it run for this position in the future.

Bilateral Relations

Although Poland's relations with all the Western Balkan countries maintain correct, it does not manifest a clear will to deepen

bilateral cooperation. While the country has its embassies in all the countries in the area (except Kosovo), Poland's diplomatic activity in the region is slim. In the period between the formation of the Tusk cabinet (autumn 2007) and the completion of this text (July 2009), there has not been a single meeting between the Polish prime minister and a government leader of any country in the region within the framework of bilateral cooperation. Apart from the above-mentioned meeting with the Bosnian minister in New York, there have been two meetings between heads of diplomacy. On 26 November 2008, Gordan Jandroković, the Croatian minister of foreign affairs, paid an official visit to Poland. On 2 July 2009 in turn, Serbia's Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić was in Warsaw on a working visit, but Minister Sikorski has not visited any country of the Western Balkans. President Kaczyński has been more active in bilateral contacts, as in December 2007 he met with Željko Komšić, the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency Chairman, who was paying an official visit to Warsaw. In January 2008, the president met in Zagreb with Croatian President Stjepan Mesić, and in May 2009 in Belgrade with the Serbian President, Boris Tadić. In addition, there were other meetings at the presidential level resulting from the calendar of multilateral regional cooperation, as well as courtesy meetings.

The resources allocated for support to the Western Balkan countries are merely a fraction of Polish foreign assistance, with more significant projects solely a result of commitments within the Regional Partnership¹. Following decisions adopted in Budapest in 2005 on distribution of tasks related to the coordination of assistance to the Balkan countries, Poland has been in charge of sharing experiences from the use of pre-accession EU funds. As part of this initiative, since 2006 the Office of the Committee for European Integration (UKIE) has been carrying out several projects a year. These include study visits, internships, workshops and trainings conducted by experts from Poland [6]. All countries of the region received this aid. However, after a substantial reduction of the UKIE budget, there were no funds approved for these projects in 2009. In parallel, funds for the Western Balkans have been cut in the development aid budget controlled by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so only two projects will be implemented in the year 2009 within this initiative. The projects are addressed to five countries of the region, except Croatia, which is not covered by development aid. An argument for a continuation and for an enhancement of these activities is that Poland is seen in the Balkans as a model country in taking advantage of the EU funds. Another valuable element of the Polish experience embraces

¹ In 2007, the amount allocated to the Western Balkans amounted to PLN1.42 million, representing 0.14% of the total amount of PLN1.01 billion of Poland's development assistance. In 2008, PLN2 million was assigned for assistance to the Balkans, followed by PLN1 million in 2009.

the reforms connected with the fight against organised crime, which in all the countries of the region is a significant obstacle on their path to the EU, alongside corruption and inefficient administration and judicial systems.

Poland's involvement in cooperation with the Western Balkans countries at the working level can be noted in particular with regard to Croatia. This is due to the fact that the country is most advanced in the process of integration with the EU. In February 2008, Željko Kuprešak, Secretary of State for European Integration in the Croatian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, paid a working visit to Warsaw. In July 2008, the secretary of state at the Ministry of Interior and Administration went to Croatia for a working visit together with the heads of the police and border guards, who declared their readiness to share the expertise from the services' preparation for the protection of EU external borders. Moreover, a Croatian offer to establish Polish police patrols on the Adriatic coast for the summer—in order to enhance contacts with tourists from Poland—was greeted with interest by the Polish side. In 2009, however, this initiative has not been implemented, although all V4 countries have their police patrols in this country. In February 2009, a delegation of the Croatian Ministry of the Interior paid visit to Warsaw. Working relations have also been developed by the Ministries of Justice.

The limited political involvement of Poland in the Western Balkans is to some extent associated with relatively low economic cooperation with the region. Polish trade with the countries of this part of Europe remains at a very low level. Both exports and imports remain below 1% for all of the countries in the region together.

In recent years we have been observing a rising interest in the Western Balkans among experts, as can be exemplified by the book „The Western Balkans and European integration: Perspectives and implications“ published by the UKIE and the Centre for Eastern Studies in Warsaw [22]. It was noted in the publication that the Polish interest is to maintain support for the generous EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), which Poland has been profiting from. A considerable agricultural sector in the Western Balkan countries makes them potential partners within the EU for supporting the CAP. In addition, it was stressed that after accession to the EU the region would gain in importance as a market for Polish goods. The experts' interest in the Western Balkans results also from a search for model solutions of multilateral cooperation within the framework of the Eastern Partnership [11]. The aftermath of cooperation of experts from the V4 countries is a publication of the Polish Institute of

International Affairs (PISM) on Bosnia and Herzegovina [9], while a periodical issued by the Institute has discussed Polish policy towards the Western Balkans, suggesting its enhancement [13].

Assessment

Poland's policy towards the Western Balkans is characterized by continuation. In the years 2008–2009, it did not differ substantially from the policy towards the region pursued in the preceding years. Poland's activities in the area were slightly more intensive than before, but this resulted from its international and regional involvement as well as from the need to respond to current political developments in this part of Europe, and did not reflect a strategic enhancement of Poland's interest in the region.

Poland's limited involvement in the Western Balkans is associated largely with the fact that Polish foreign policy oriented to the external environment of the EU has been focused on Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, now covered by the Eastern Partnership. Promotion of this project has become a priority for Poland and will remain so in the coming years, also during the Polish presidency in the EU Council in the second half of 2011. This Eastward orientation had sometimes been accompanied by low flexibility of Polish politicians, seeking to link some successes or incentives for integration in the Western Balkans with an adequate opening to the Eastern neighbourhood countries. Such approach was undermining the Polish position as a partner in creating the EU's policy towards the Western Balkans.

The Western Balkans will probably not rank high on the agenda of the Polish presidency in the EU Council. As Poland takes over the presidency from Hungary, issues related to the region can be expected in the agenda „inherited“ from the predecessor, since Hungary will pay more attention to this part of Europe. Although the Western Balkans will remain a priority region for the EU in the coming years, the reluctance to strengthen the Polish involvement in this direction can be explained by a principle of „non diffusion“ of power, used in practice for many years, and by its willingness to deepen the „Eastern specialization“. Experience from the previous presidencies may indicate that such a niche strategy is successful, but expectations may be higher with regard to Poland as the largest country of Central Europe. A more ambitious policy in the Western Balkans and accomplishment of a clearly-defined strategy in this area does not necessarily mean a weakening of the effectiveness of the Polish

policy towards the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership, but will only strengthen the position of Poland in the EU, including in relation to the Eastern neighbourhood.

A clearer involvement in a swift integration of the Western Balkans with the EU would be beneficial for the implementation of the priorities of Polish foreign policy, also because the Balkans are of great importance for European energy security due to the planned routes of the competing Nabucco and South Stream gas pipelines. In Poland, which pays particularly high attention to energy security, also on the EU forum, awareness of this fact has increased in recent years, as is reflected in a very clear Polish support for the Nabucco. In March 2009, Poland supported the Czech project to fund this gas pipeline from EU sources, which would enable Europe to receive gas without Russia's involvement.

It should not be expected that before the Balkan countries' accession to the EU there would be an enlargement to the East. A fiasco or excessive complications of the process of Western Balkans' integration with the EU will deepen the member states' reluctance to cooperate with the countries covered by the Eastern Partnership in a way that could result in their accession to the EU. A clearer support for reforms in the Balkan countries and for their integration with the EU could in turn mean that in the future enlarged Union it might be easier to rally the support of countries in the region for joint operations in the East and to counterbalance their interest in cooperation with Mediterranean countries covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy. Emphasizing Poland's political presence in this area may also intensify economic contacts with the countries of the region.

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