



Transition society on European integration

In its thousand-year long history Poland has never had the chance to experience the benefits stemming from membership in international and supranational systems of states. The First Polish Republic (the Noble Republic) in union with Lithuania since 1569 lost its relevance long-ago and is hardly a case to be invoked here. It was rather the negative effects of international-block membership that were endured in Poland; such membership more often than not entailed limited sovereignty for the country or a total lack thereof.

In fact, Poland should be treated as a young nation-state not fully mature: following 123 years of bondage it returned to the political map of Europe for 20 years after the First World War only to be annihilated again by German and Soviet aggression in 1939. From the end of World War II Poland functioned as a state with limited sovereignty within the Soviet block where national identity was being molded in a specific manner.

One can make the assumption, therefore, that the attitudes and opinions held by Poles on Europe and European integration were to a considerable degree determined by tradition which itself was based on the dire consequences of Poland's membership in major systems of states. Up until 1989 access to information on Europe and the process of European integration was undoubtedly limited and ideologically instrumentalized. Poles at that time had only fragmentary and stereotype knowledge of Europe which gave way to certain clichés, idea clusters and slogans. This, however, did not preclude a strong sense of belonging to Europe culturally felt by the Polish people, both as a nation and as society.

1. Perceiving Europe and European integration up to 1989

The Polish and German perception of Europe and European integration was not simultaneous nor was it symmetrical. The fundamental factor shaping the history of both nations was post-war geopolitics. Poles, who from a historical perspective were familiar with the idea of a uniting Europe were cut off from participating in the creation of the European Community. During the war Polish politicians already thought about Europe along similar lines

to those of the future fathers of European integration. At this point let us recall the little-known fact, recounted, incidentally, by the German weekly “Der Spiegel” in 2002 in its series *Das Europa der Europaer*. In 1942 the then Prime Minister of the Polish government, general Władysław Sikorski called a meeting of the heads of the exiled governments of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, Greece and general de Gaulle to present his project of the European Community. Alas, the “iron curtain” divided Europe into Western Europe – which was free to fulfill plans of this sort, and eastern Europe – which was not destined to experience the freedom of choice. It turned out, however, that the “iron curtain” was not that airtight and Europe existed as a community based on certain values; although it must be said that the idea was vivid only in intellectual and academic circles.

It must be emphasized that the way Polish people perceive Europe and European integration was formed in the course of contacts and dialogue with Western Europe and the Federal Republic of Germany in particular. We have adopted many ideas and concepts of uniting Europe and this unprecedented process – European integration – from the Germans of the Bonn Republic. Poles were convinced the process of European integration, not conceived of in terms of profit calculation but solidarity, harmony, multipartisanship and self-restraint was a success. Thus understood, the process seemed to the average Pole a natural regularity of political development. These ideas saw them through the watershed years (not only for Europe) of the eighties and nineties. Later on, as transition society, Poles sought easy, quick solutions in the social, political and economic spheres. They were counting on the consideration, sympathy and solidarity of others; small wonder then that they had high hopes of Europe and European integration. Things however were about to change dramatically. A united German state had an altogether different idea of European integration. In this context we can speak of a lack of simultaneity of perceiving European integration in Poland and Germany. Polish perception stopped at a Europe of harmony, solidarity, self-restraint, whereas the German one went into the phase of pragmatism and profit/loss calculation.

2. Opinions and attitudes during the period of negotiation

Prior to 1989 our notions of integration and Europe were idealized and fragmentary. It is only after 1989 that we can speak of a true molding of attitudes and opinions of European integration, when the possibility of establishing closer ties and contacts arose together with the prospect of joining the European Communities. The idea of Poland’s EU membership enjoyed wide support among the Polish public right up to the start of negotiations on Poland’s EU accession.

Having said that, however, it must be stressed that in the early 1990s Europe and European integration were primarily conceived of through the prism of Polish national interests and “our business”. Poland was the priority, while notions of Europe and integration were oversimplified and full of myths.¹ This soon began to change: the early 1990s saw Polish society take a deeper interest in European integration. In 1990 75 percent of the polled claimed to have heard of the European Community, whereas in 1994 it was already 86 percent. It is a pity that the conclusion of the European Association Treaty with the European Communities which came into effect in February 1, 1995 was not used for a stronger promotion of European integration. The treaty itself did not generate further interest in European integration nor did it contribute to broaden people’s knowledge on the subject. It must be said that their familiarity with the European Communities, and especially the consequences of the European integration process – the rights and responsibilities of the nation-state, were quite limited. In 1994 21 percent of the polled thought that Poland would have the same status and rights as the “old” members of the Community; 28 percent took the opposite view, and 31 percent had no opinion on this issue.²

At that time attitudes and opinions changed quickly. According to public opinion polls, in 1996 as many as 80 percent of Polish society supported the idea of Polish EU membership. This strong pro-European sentiment was tied no doubt to the conviction that EU membership spelled progress and modernization and other benefits resulting from the solidarity-principle being followed across the EU. European integration was seen as a cure-all for the many ills triggered by the social, economic and political transformation as well as the uniquely Polish evils of political life brought about before or after 1989.

A breakthrough in the Polish debate on European integration came with the start of official negotiations on Polish EU membership on March 31, 1998. In Poland they generated considerable interest and hope. According to a survey conducted by CBOS, 45 percent of respondents were in favor of the negotiations while 36 percent expressed anxiety over the talks.³ On this date European integration entered Polish political discourse and remained there on a permanent basis. Positions and opinions continued to differ sharply; knowledge was slowly broadening and opinions becoming more rational. During the negotiations 60 percent of the respondents voiced their support for the process of European integration. In 1998 that number was 66 percent, and in 1999 in view of worsening economic conditions and growing unemploy-

¹ Z. Mach, ed., *Integracja europejska w oczach Polaków*, Kraków 1998, pp. 139-40.

² OBOP, *Polska a UE*, April 1994.

³ CBOS BS/89/ *Spoleczne poparcie dla Europejskiej Konstytucji. Komunikat z badań*, Warszawa, May 2005.

ment the number of those in favor of integration fell to 55 percent. It was also at this time that a group of European-integration opponents came into being, its size ranging from 19 percent in 1998 to 30 percent in 2001. During the final months of negotiations in 2002 support for EU integration amounted to 60 percent of the polled. Attention must be drawn to the fact that the conclusion of negotiations in December 2002 in Copenhagen generated a highly favorable reaction: as many as 46 percent considered the Copenhagen summit a success of Polish negotiators while 17 percent saw it as their failure.⁴

The support of Polish society for European integration is determined by socio-demographic factors. Clearly, European integration won the support of, first of all, the inhabitants of large cities with tertiary education and those who had a positive opinion about their material status. However, the argument that European integration was supported only by young people must be qualified. It follows from opinion poll analyses conducted over the period 1999-2004 that the correlation between age and support was decreasing to the point of becoming negligible. It was definitely education, the fact of being a farmer, urban dweller and an assessment of one's own material status that proved decisive in determining the attitudes and opinions of Polish society on European integration during the negotiating period.

Survey results do not demonstrate the influence of political views on the attitudes and opinions on integration. Interestingly enough, there was a closer relationship between support for integration and right-wing views during the premiership of Jerzy Buzek (AWS), and stronger support for Polish EU membership was closely linked to left-wing views under Jerzy Miller's (SLD) government.⁵ Using an oversimplification we can explain this relationship by saying that people tend to support integration into the EU because they trust the government. When the government coalition was criticized by the opposition, the former in response used "negative legitimization": unpopular political decisions – even concerning internal affairs – were justified to the electorate as being inevitable as a result of the process of European integration. Such practices generated skepticism towards integration among the opposition electorate. The attitude towards European integration is influenced to a large degree by the opinions voiced by political party representatives and propagated unquestioningly across the Polish media.

Furthermore, the territorial-regional factor played a crucial role in shaping Poles' opinions on European integration. It turned out that in Poland, a country with no tradition of regional identity, the studies demonstrated a differentiation of views and attitudes linked to specific regions, especially

⁴ B. Roguska, "Polska droga do Unii Europejskiej", in *Polska, Europa, Świat. Opinia publiczna w Polsce w okresie integracji*, ed. K. Zagórski and M. Skrzyszewski, Warszawa 2005, pp. 16-7.

⁵ B. Roguska, "Polska droga...", p. 23.

the voivodships (the largest administrative unit in the subnational organization of the state). In view of this Poland can be divided into two parts. The first consists of the western regions and some of the southern ones – with the largest number of respondents in favor of the EU. Their support for the process of integration in the years 2000-2004 ranged from 58 to 71 percent. The other part covers central and eastern regions where pro-EU sentiment is not that widespread. During the years 2000-2004, from 43 to 58 percent of the polled expressed their support for the pro-European cause. The largest discrepancy in the level of support between the regions was recorded in 2002 – from 43 percent in the Podkarpackie voivodship including Krakow, among other cities, to 73 percent in the Lubuskie voivodship with Zielona Gora as one of its cities. This differentiation between regions can be explained by the difference in the intensity of contacts with the West and the structure of farms. The inflow of investment from the West and the comprehensive development of relations with the Germans to a large extent determine the favorable view of integration. On the other hand, communities in the eastern regions, with a predominance of small and medium-sized farms feared, and rightly so, that integration with the EU would carry with it a reduction in contacts with the East, including the beneficial trade links with Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. The survey conducted during Poland's negotiations with the EU revealed yet another interesting result: the smaller the involvement in religious practices the stronger the support for European integration.⁶

3. Accession referendum

In the accession referendum which took place June 7-8, 2003 Poles showed their support for European integration. The turnout rate was 58.85 percent, out of which 77.45 percent (13.51 million people) voted for joining the EU and only 22.55 percent (3.92 million) voted against. In terms of both the turnout and support, this was a relatively good result against the results in the old fifteen and the new accession countries. The numbers no doubt point to the fact that more integration-supporters took part in the voting than opponents. Polish media summed it up by saying: “integration opponents stayed at home”. That said, let us note that Poland's integration into the EU was a conscious decision on the part of the Polish public.

The referendum proved a success in terms of internal politics, as well. The popularity of the left-wing government was waning fast, and SLD (the Democratic Left Alliance) was consistently slipping in the polls. The organizers feared not so much the result of the vote as the turnout. If less than

⁶ B. Roguska, “Polska droga...”, p. 23.

50 percent of registered voters participate in a referendum in Poland, as was often the case earlier, then, according to law, the referendum is invalid. And let us not forget the important contribution made by the Catholic church and other Christian faiths to the success of the accession referendum. The Polish Episcopate in a special statement appealed to the public to take part in the vote, which definitely effected voter turnout.

The region-related differentiation of the score was not that big. The lowest approval rate was recorded in southern-eastern Poland, in the Lubelskie (69 percent) and Podkarpackie voivodships (70 percent). The highest, from 84 to 85 percent, was recorded in the western regions: Opolskie, Śląskie, Lubuskie and Zachodniopomorskie.

4. Opinions and attitudes towards EU eastward enlargement

The enlargement of the EU towards the East was, no doubt, one of the most crucial developments of European integration. It had a quantitative as well as a qualitative dimension, particularly historical. In the latter sense, it was not enlargement but primarily the conclusion of the grand project of European unification, which as a continent had always embraced its central and eastern parts. Enlargement alluded to the words of Robert Schumann, who said in 1963: “We have to create a united Europe not only in the interests of free nations but also in order to be able to welcome to this commonwealth the nations of eastern Europe, when freed from the oppression they will apply for being accepted and they will seek moral support there. Every step we take on this road will be an opportunity for them. It is our duty to be ready.”

With a mind to underscoring the uniqueness of this process, the Polish discourse attempted to abandon the rhetoric of enlargement in favor of completing the grand project of integrating Europe. There was little understanding for this plan in the countries of the old European Union – never becoming popular in Polish literature either.

By enlarging the Union towards the East, the area of the Union increased by 23 percent, i.e. totaling 4 million km², and the population by 19 percent, i.e. amounting to 450 million. The economic potential brought in by the ten newcomers was not that impressive. The total GDP of the enlarged EU grew only by 5 percent. The ten new members make a diversified group, yet they share some common features. Cyprus and Malta are small islands, relatively rich thus posing no problems for enlargement. The eight post-communist states, mainly small and medium-sized, are diversified. Poland’s parameters posed a serious problem for the EU. Poland represents 42 percent of the new area, 52 percent of the newly integrated people, and 45 percent of the GDP contributed by the newcomers.

The views and attitudes of the Polish public on European integration were no doubt shaped by the quantitative and qualitative aspects of this very process. The process of Poland's joining the EU was unique in many respects. First, it was not sudden: Poland was treated unlike the East German federated states, where the liberalization of trade, the flow of capital and other adjustment criteria were implemented – one could say – overnight. In Poland's case there was a much longer adjustment process encompassing the legal and economic spheres. It was also different from the sort of accession experienced by the Mediterranean states of the 1980s. At the time of joining the Union the economies of those countries were closed and protected by high tariffs, while Poland's economy remained open since 1989. If Poland's accession could be likened to any other country then it would have to be, in part, Austria, Sweden or Finland.

The attitudes of Polish society towards enlargement, as reported by the *Eurobarometr* in 2003, were more favorable than the attitudes expressed by the majority of the states of the old fifteen. However, this overall comprehensive support was not that staunch or homogenous, even in the short run – from the Autumn of 2003 to the Spring of 2004. In the beginning of this period 60 percent of the respondents expressed their approval for accession, while at the end their support slumped to 42 percent. This could be explained by the Brussels-summit fiasco in December 2003 and the ensuing commentaries in the European press, German especially, speaking of Polish blame. The titles of newspaper articles speak for themselves: *EU Gipfel an Polen gescheitert* or *Schröder droht den EU-Abweichlern*, or *Schurken Polen haut Kanalien Deutschland*.

It looks as if the media in some of the old fifteen member-states decided to scare its readers by the new members and tarnish their, not that impeccable image. This media debate must be seen in the context of the deficit of information on Poland and eastern Europe, a gap sometimes filled with current stereotypical opinions.⁷ And yet, some governments of the old fifteen, especially the German government took up certain advertising campaigns in order to inform their public of the benefits stemming from enlargement. Helmut Kohl and Gerhard Schroeder saw the enlargement process in terms of historical responsibility. However, the discourse among the elites did not always find its way into the wider social discourse.

In the early stages of the negotiation process Poles clearly saw the benefits of joining the EU. However, the period 1994-2004 saw a new tendency sweep in, namely a continuous fall in optimism in terms of the general benefits for Poland and personal gains for the respondents. In 2003, out of the 10 new

⁷ See *Przeciw stereotypom. Rozszerzenie Unii Europejskiej o Polskę*, Warszawa 2001, p. 19.

members, Poland was sixth in terms of the positive assessment of its future EU membership. In 2004, just before the accession the optimism associated with EU membership – both for individual people and the state as a whole dropped even further. According to a 2004 survey of the CBOS the percentage of those who saw enlargement as beneficial was almost balanced by those who primarily saw the drawbacks of Poland’s membership in the EU.⁸

5. The future of the EU in the views and attitudes of the Polish public

A European Union of 25 states is in many respects an altogether different Union. The initial concept of a 25-member Union, embraced various other spheres on top of the economy. A Europe seeking to meet the challenges of globalization must be more integrated. It was insisted strongly that the process of European integration went deeper and embraced politics, the military, social issues and culture. By expanding eastward, the European Union became more diversified internally; however the institutional structure and decision-making mechanism remained almost unchanged. This, in turn, raised many questions concerning the future of the EU, its institutional and decision-making structure and – what is closely related – democratic legitimation.

The debate on the future shape of the Union, following the establishment of the Convent and the conclusion of its work ended in the signing of the Treaty establishing the Constitution for Europe. This debate and the work of the Convent was running in parallel to the debate on the accession of the ten new members. In the run-up to Poland’s full membership, Poles did not devote much attention to the first debate. Their knowledge on the constitutional treaty, like other societies’, was not substantial. More than 70 percent claimed they knew very little or nothing at all about the treaty. The lack of knowledge did not signify a lack of opinion on the subject. In early 2005 support for the treaty was considerable. In February 2005, 66 percent declared they would take part in the referendum endorsing the treaty, but in May the number fell to 61 percent, while 38 percent of the polled voiced their pro-treaty sentiment.⁹ Plans to participate in the referendum endorsing the treaty stemmed from the positive attitude to Poland’s membership in the EU. Almost three quarters of those eager to take part in the referendum hailed from the group of respondents in favor of Poland’s membership. Of the group of Poles opposed to EU membership only 39 percent said they would vote in the referendum. At this time there was a declining tendency in the positive

⁸ B. Roguska, “Polska droga...”, p. 27.

⁹ CBOS BS/89/ *Spoleczne poparcie dla...*

declarations of the potential participants in the referendum in favor of the treaty. In February 2005, 64 percent of the polled supported the treaty and 7 percent were against; whereas in May 60 percent would have voted favorably and 14 percent, unfavorably.

The waning interest in the constitution treaty could be attributed to three causes. First, the echoes of the critical debate on the constitution treaty in the media of the old fifteen, which was not always understandable to the Polish public. Second, the death of Pope John II could have drawn the attention of the Polish public to the controversies surrounding the allusion to Christian religion as the heritage shaping European identity in the preamble of the constitutional treaty, thereby producing attitudes critical of the entire constitutional treaty project. Third, in the Polish debate and public opinion polls, the constitution treaty was referred to as a “constitution for Europe” which could imply that it is a constitution resembling the basic law for a state.

Amid this confusion not many Poles were aware that this treaty was not meant to create a “European state”; that it was only an international agreement modifying the already binding treaties establishing the European Union. There was a direct link between approval for the treaty, voting in the referendum and the attitude towards Polish EU membership. EU membership supporters were definitely in favor of the constitutional treaty, whereas the opponents indicated they would vote against it. Public opinion polls and the atmosphere of the debate in Poland indicated clearly that the majority of Polish society would vote in favor of adopting the constitutional treaty. This sentiment however was to change abruptly, sparked off by the reaction to the treaty in France and the Netherlands. Today it is difficult to assess the chances of the treaty on Polish soil; it must be said however that public opinion in Poland understood the French and Dutch “no” as a retroactive rejection of the Eastward enlargement of the EU.¹⁰

Some circles have realized that not only has the treaty become a lost cause, but Poland itself – as a new EU member – has become a lost cause, too. Of course, there are political groups which bandy slogans about, calling for the necessity of withdrawing from the EU. These are not influential circles and they stand little chance of determining our involvement in the Union, or Polish policy on the future shape of Europe.

On the whole, the way Poles see the future of the European Union is similar to that of the other European nations. The findings of the October 2005 survey held for the TV station ARTE indicate that the anxieties concerning European integration are not more acute in Poland than they are in France, Germany or Britain (“Gazeta Wyborcza” October 2005). Very much like the

¹⁰ J. Łukaszewski, “Kryzys integracji europejskiej i wyznania dla Polski”, in *Rzecz o przyszłości Europy*, Warszawa 2005, p. 70.

French, British or Germans, Poles hold the view that the Union has opened up their country to the world and given them a sense of freedom; to a lesser degree, however, they fear that the Union threatens their national identity. Poles, like so many other European nations, think that many problems can be solved more effectively on the European level, chief amongst them: fighting terrorism, R&D, university-level education, protection of the natural environment, foreign policy, immigration and curbing unemployment. Speaking of the prospects for the development of the EU, Poles express their support for creating a joint army and the extension of the euro-zone to include other countries. Poles are not nearly as keen on the institutional expansion of the Union as the other nations. They see no reason for appointing an EU foreign minister, or a euro-president (only 26 percent of the polled back the idea of establishing the institution of a euro-president).

It is only fitting to conclude this analysis with a final remark on the type of factors which are going to affect the opinions and attitudes of Polish society on the future of European integration. Judging by the findings of an empirical study carried out at the Institute of Political Science at Warsaw University, one may assume that they will be determined by two contrasting identities currently embraced by Poles.¹¹ The first – Polish, marked with national dignity, a strong attachment to tradition, patriotism, but at the same time self-critical with an inferiority complex linked to all this, especially in relation to west-European societies. The second – European, which represents modernity, openness, prosperity and entrepreneurship. A clash of these two contrasting identities can produce two dramatically different situations. The pessimistic option anticipates deepening frustration and national complexes, which will strengthen the skeptical and anti-European sentiment among Poles. The optimistic option believes that the autocratic image of Poles can serve as a wake-up call for the nation to take up a modernizing effort in order to stave off civilizational backwardness. This, it is hoped, will in the long run contribute to shape pro-European opinions and attitudes and a more wide-spread approval for initiatives designed to reform the European Union.

¹¹ J. Błuszkowski, *Stereotypy a tożsamość narodowa*, Warszawa 2005, p. 134.