

POLICY BRIEF

Going forward anyway

The Polish view of the crisis of the Eastern Partnership



Published in the framework of the OnlineAkademie-Dossier "The EU from the perspective of the Central and Eastern European member states" in the project SommerAkademie *Europa*, © 2013

Grzegorz Gromadzki, Expert cooperating with the Institute of Public Affairs

Łukasz Wenerski, Analyst in the European Programme, Institute of Public Affairs

There is a growing awareness in Poland that 2013 is crucial for the Eastern Partnership (EaP) initiative. The Polish authorities, along with experts and journalists, understand that after four years of the functioning of the EaP, there is a need for concrete results. From the Polish perspective the EaP has been perceived, since the very beginning, as a chance for the gradual integration – both economic and political - of the Eastern countries with the European Union. Now the time has come to check whether the EaP countries are closer to EU standards than they were 4 or 5 years ago. Unfortunately, the answer is rather pessimistic.

This not only applies to Azerbaijan and Belarus, which have been autocratic regimes for many years, but also to much more democratic states such as Ukraine, where anti-democratic tendencies are growing, demonstrated *inter alia* by the persecution of the political opposition, and Georgia, where actions undertaken by the government against its political rivals could lead to a deterioration of the still fragile Georgian democracy. Only Moldova could be seen to be a positive exception, but almost permanent political instability may disturb the process of its integration with the EU. This difficult situation in EaP countries does not come as a big surprise for Polish politicians, diplomats and experts, as the realistic assessment of its Eastern partners has been present in Polish foreign policy since the early 1990s. An overestimation of the pro-reformist skills of political elites from EaP countries has only

been present in the case of Ukraine after the Orange Revolution, when the Polish authorities and circles of experts expected relatively fast changes towards a well-functioning liberal democracy. Mediocre results have provoked a wave of disillusionment in Poland which is still present today.

Ukraine as a key country

Nevertheless, the Polish authorities stands on the position that despite the deteriorating situation in EaP countries, the EU has to go forward towards association, first of all with Ukraine, but also with the other countries (Georgia, Moldova and Armenia). The Association Agreement with DCFTA is considered as the main and indispensable tool for the gradual integration of EaP countries with the EU. The Polish authorities perceive the Association



Agreement as a declaration of commitment towards future complex modernisation of the state by the political elites from Eastern European countries. Without the Association Agreements the EU will lose its already limited influence on the authorities of EaP countries in the coming years.

From the Polish perspective, the biggest problem is precisely Ukraine, because it is perceived as a key country for the future of the EaP, and EU policy towards Eastern Europe in general, including Russia. Other EaP countries are much less important and not decisive. This opinion is dominant among Polish politicians, diplomats and experts. According to the “Go forward” strategy, Poland puts enormous effort into having the Association Agreement with Ukraine signed at the Eastern Partnership summit in Vilnius in November 2013, including diplomatic efforts such as meetings between Polish and Ukrainian officials. In 2013 Polish president Bronisław Komorowski met twice with President Viktor Yanukovich (on 20-21 February in Wisła and 22 March in Warsaw), he also hosted the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, Leonid Kozhara (on 27 February) and Volodymyr Rybak, the Chairman of the Verhovna Rada (on 25 March) in Warsaw. The aim of these visits was to convince Ukrainian political leaders that Poland supports the European integration of Ukraine, but any further steps (including signing the Association Agreement) bringing Ukraine closer to the EU will be hard to realise until the persecuted and jailed opposition leaders have been freed.

What needs to be emphasised is that both Yanukovich’s visits to Poland in 2013 were organised in the format of trilateral meetings. In Wisła, President Bronisław Komorowski also hosted the President of Slovakia, Ivan Gašparovič, while János Áder, President of Hungary was invited as a third partner to the March discussion in

Warsaw. On the one hand, this trilateral format could be perceived as an attempt to put bigger pressure on Viktor Yanukovich to stop persecuting and jailing the opposition, but at the same time it could also serve as a strategy of convincing the Ukrainian leader that the ring of Ukrainian friends supporting the association of this country with the EU is not only limited to Poland. Unfortunately, the second option could only serve as a successful story if Yanukovich is truly interested in integrating with the EU, which seems to be very unlikely at the present moment.

At the same time, Polish officials are trying to find a balance between contacting the Ukrainian authorities and representatives of the opposition. A visit by Vitali Klitschko, the leader of UDAR party, to Warsaw on 15 March 2013 where he met President Komorowski, could serve as an example of dialogue with the latter. Nevertheless, it is visible that until the future of the Association Agreement is still undetermined, the Polish authorities want to mostly concentrate on dialogue with the Ukrainian president and representatives of the government, to make it as effective as possible.

The Polish authorities support the so-called 11 points of the European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle, presented to the Ukrainian authorities, which include a list of conditions which should be met by Ukraine before the signature of the Association Agreement. However, it must be noticed that according to Polish diplomats, there is no agreement within the EU of what level of fulfilment of these conditions by Ukraine would be sufficient to sign the Association Agreement with the country. The biggest disagreements among EU countries relates to the level of human rights protection, the problem of selective justice and the persecution of opposition



leaders. Poland does not seem to be so strict in implementing the above-mentioned values before signing the Association Agreement, as it stands on the position that it is the regulations of the Association Agreement which would serve as the best tool for executing these values. However, the authorities of numerous member states hold the opposite opinion and are waiting for the release of Yulia Tymoshenko from prison. The pardoning of Yuriy Lutsenko, the former minister of interior, by President Yanukovich on 7 April 2013 is a step in right direction, but not sufficient for several member states.

Efforts before the Vilnius summit do not concentrate solely on Ukraine. Moldova and Georgia are also present on the Polish agenda. In the last six months Poland has hosted two official visits from Georgia – President Komorowski met Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili on 6 December 2012, and the Georgian minister of foreign affairs, Maya Panjikidze, visited Poland on 28 January 2013. It is also possible that Bidzina Ivanishvili, the current Prime Minister of Georgia, will pay a visit to Poland in 2013. On the one hand, the visits of Georgian politicians to Poland are always summarised with a conclusion of hope that the Association Agreement with Georgia will be initiated at the Vilnius summit, while at the same time Poland has addressed a clear message to the new government that they should stop persecuting the political opposition.

The European agenda is also a dominant factor in Polish relations with Moldova. The perspective of concluding the Association Agreement with Moldova was discussed during a joint visit to Chişinău on 19 February by Polish Minister of Foreign Relations Radosław Sikorski, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs William Hague and Swedish Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt. The Polish authori-

ties tried to convince Moldovan politicians, despite the current political maelstrom, to protect the pro-European attitude of their country. However, the future is difficult to predict.

All these efforts have been launched jointly by the president and the government as there are no significant differences between the government and the president's policy towards EaP countries. Besides executive power, both chambers of the Polish parliament (the Sejm and Senat) are active in trying to persuade their partners from EaP countries that European integration is the best choice for them.

There are again voices from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticising the lack of accession perspective of EaP countries. According to this opinion, only this kind of incentive can serve as an impulse for deep and comprehensive changes. The logic is simple – if the EU declares that it wants the EaP countries to join the European family, society is ready to support well-qualified, pro-European elites that accept all the rules of state of law, as only these elites can lead country towards full membership of the EU.

Poland has noticed a huge lack of willingness among some EU countries to give any future promises regarding the full integration of EaP countries with the EU. The argument is that the EU has to concentrate more on internal affairs. Poland takes the stand that the time over to internal maelstroms should not have a negative impact on EU cooperation with and support to EaP countries. The Polish position in favour of EaP countries integration with the EU is again particularly visible in the case of Ukraine, as seen during an address by the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs on the goals of foreign policy in 2013, when Radosław Sikorski tried to



convince Polish MPs that if Ukraine creates “the conditions for signing the association agreement, Poland will endeavour to grant the country a 'European perspective' at the upcoming Eastern Partnership summit”.¹

Society is not less important than state

Many Polish politicians and diplomats say that apart from the Association Agreements the EU also has a second tool for deeper integration of EaP countries with the EU, namely the Visa Free Agreements. The key is that this tool has to stay separated from the current political situations, and should be focused on relations with the societies of EaP countries. The sooner the EU as a whole understands this, the better. Moldova is a leader in implementing the necessary changes for visa free regimes. In Ukraine we are still seeing stagnation in this process (the impossibility of jumping to the next level of implementing standards). Visa free regimes are of enormous importance for building pro-European attitudes of EaP societies. In the opinion of some Polish diplomats, the abolishment of visas with Moldova could be possible as early as 2014. Polish diplomacy expects real progress from Ukraine towards visa-free movement, namely the passage from the first stage of the process to the second, although this completely depends on the Ukrainian authorities' readiness to act. Other projects within the EaP initiative could be very useful, but not decisive. Polish diplomacy sees a huge chance for Erasmus for all, and advocates making this programme fully available for EaP students from 2014.

The policy focused on society is warmly

welcomed by Polish NGOs. They frequently underline the fact that relations with society have the same significance as relations with states, because the European future of EaP countries can only be built with the pro-European attitudes of people. Polish NGOs take an active part, therefore, in the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum, and support larger EU support for civil society in EaP countries. One could say that Polish NGOs are the most active among the NGOs from EU member states in contact with NGOs from EaP countries.

Another way of supporting civil society in EaP countries is the European Endowment for Democracy (EED). Polish officials, especially the minister of foreign affairs, were extremely engaged in establishing this organisation, and Jerzy Pomianowski, Polish diplomat, was nominated to be its first director. EED, which aims at supporting democratic development in third countries, will be operational from the middle of 2013, with a grant budget of 8 million euros.²

What next after Vilnius?

It should be strongly underlined that from the Polish perspective, the Vilnius summit will only be successful if the Association Agreement with Ukraine is signed. Initiating the Association Agreement with Moldova and Georgia is important but not decisive. Unfortunately, the possibility of signing the Association Agreement in Vilnius is very limited, unless Yulia Tymoshenko is released from prison.

The question has to be asked whether Poland has a Plan B to prevent the stag-

¹ Address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs on the goals of Polish foreign policy in 2013, 19 March 2013, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/news/address_by_the_minister_of_foreign_affairs_on_the_goals_of_polish_foreign_policy_in2013 (accessed 7 April 2013).

² More about EED: V. Rihackova, *Great expectations. The Launch of the European Endowment of Democracy should mark the beginning of a new era of EU democracy assistance*, <http://pasos.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/great-expectations-vera-rihackova1.pdf> (accessed 7 April 2013).



nation of EU-Ukraine relations, in case the Association Agreement is not signed. However, in all probability, Poland does not have a Plan B and is putting all its eggs in one basket by focusing solely on the EaP summit. This is the crucial challenge for Polish diplomacy after Vilnius. It is clear that Poland would like to avoid: a) the isolation of Ukraine and treatment of Ukraine similarly to Belarus, and b) the pushing out of the relations with EaP countries from the EU Agenda.

Polish politicians and diplomats fear that without the Association Agreement, Ukraine and other EaP countries will sooner or later decide to accept membership into the customs union with Russia or other forms of in-depth cooperation with Moscow, which would be the end of their integration with the EU for quite some time.

Polish politicians, diplomats and experts understand that Germany is a key partner in the shaping of EU policy towards Eastern Europe. Warsaw and Berlin usually go hand in hand with their opinion about the situation in EaP countries. Exceptions can be noticed, however, as was the case when Chancellor Angela Merkel, having the health problems of jailed Yulia Tymoshenko in mind, stated that: "Today, we in Germany and the European Union live in peace and freedom. Unfortunately, not all Europe is, because in Ukraine and Belarus people are still suffering under dictatorship and repression."³ This comparison of Ukraine to Belarus was perceived very negatively in Poland.

It seems reasonably that the ministries of foreign affairs and/or think tanks from both

countries should jointly prepare a Plan B for EU-Ukraine relations and the future of the EaP in general, if the Association Agreement with Ukraine is not signed in Vilnius. The common position of Germany and Poland could be decisive for the future of EU policy towards Eastern Europe at this difficult time.

The cooperation of Poland and Germany is necessary in supporting the functioning of the European Endowment for Democracy. It is expected that Germany will play a more important role in this initiative than it has done so far and serve with its political and financial backup as Poland does.

What might happen if no Association Agreement is signed at the Vilnius summit and the EU is unable to offer any alternative plan? The answer is simple and has been widely commented on⁴ – we will have to prepare for at least two years of deep stagnation. In 2014 the countries of the EU will definitely concentrate on the Union's internal affairs – the election to the European Parliament, preceded and followed by a stormy debate of the future of the EU, as well as an expiring mandate of the current European Commission. In turn, 2014 and the beginning of 2015 will be marked by a political campaign in Ukraine, and a fight for the post of president. It therefore seems obvious that Ukraine integration with the EU will recede into the background.

³ Angela Merkel's statement on 10 May 2012 in an address to Germany's Bundestag, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/05/10/uk-germany-ukraine-belarus-idUKBRE84910M20120510> (accessed 7 April 2013).

⁴ Future problems related to not signing the Association Agreement were discussed by Jaromir Sokolowski, Undersecretary of State at the Polish President's Office in a broadcast on *Radio TOK FM* on 25 March 2013, <http://www.prezydent.pl/aktualnosci/wydarzenia/art,2502,prezydent-potwierdza-stale-wsparcie-dla-ukrainy.html> (accessed 5 April 2013). Jan Tombiński, Head of the EU Delegation to Ukraine, also noticed that in 2014 and 2015 there would be "no political ambiance for a signature of the association agreement", <http://euukrainecoop.com/2013/03/21/tombinski3/> (accessed 5 April 2013).

Project Coordinators:

| BertelsmannStiftung

Gabriele Schöler
Carl-Bertelsmann-Str. 256
33311 Gütersloh
Germany

Tel: +49 5241 81-81205
Fax: +49 5241 81-681205

gabriele.schoeler@bertelsmann-stiftung.de
www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de

INSTITUTE OF
PUBLIC AFFAIRS

Dr. Agnieszka Lada
ul. Szpitalna 5 / 22
00-031 Warszawa
Poland

Tel.: +48 22 5564288
Fax: +48 22 5564262

agnieszka.lada@isp.org.pl
www.isp.org.pl