Poland’s Accession to the European Union and Its Impact on United States-Polish Relations

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Only 15 years have passed since Poland began to participate in international affairs as an independent and sovereign country. The collapse of Communism paved the way for the exploration of new opportunities in pursuing a national foreign policy agenda.

Over these last 15 years of democratic transformation, the fundamental goals of Polish foreign policy have remained clear and stable. The country needed to secure its independence and create an international environment conducive to developing a modern and competitive economy. This explains Poland’s quest for full membership in both the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU).

Today, those major goals have been accomplished. By joining NATO in 1999, Poland gained the guarantee of security from the world’s most successful alliance.

The road to membership in the European Union has been long and challenging. Poland had to adopt the demanding and complex legislative system that governs the European single market. In order to meet these requirements, it was necessary to carry out an extensive transformation of Polish institutions and corporations.

May 1, 2004, marks a truly extraordinary moment in the history of a unified Europe. By admitting ten new members, the European Union has embraced the central part of the continent as well as two countries from the Mediterranean. This achievement ultimately reconfirms that democracy and the free market economy have become an irrevocable reality in Central Europe. By reversing the political consequences of the Yalta order, Europe has become “more free and unified.”

For Poland, the importance of NATO and EU integration stretches far beyond the issues of security and economic opportunity. Membership in both organizations has had a tremendous impact on our position in Europe. Thanks to the successes on the international scene as well as the consolidation of reforms and reconciliation with its neighbors, Poland has emerged as an important contributor to the stability of the region.

Benefits of EU Enlargement

There is a general understanding that enlargement has benefited both the European Union as a whole and the new member states. Enlargement extended the size of the single market to over 500 million consumers, ensuring a free flow of goods and services. Poland has benefited from either the total removal or reduction of most trade barriers. Constraints on the freedom of movement of workers also will be gradually removed.
Thanks to the participation in the social and economic cohesion policy of the EU, Poland will obtain substantial financial assistance in various forms. These resources will be used to co-finance infrastructure upgrades and rural development and to combat unemployment. According to some economic analyses, had Poland remained outside the EU, its average GDP growth rate would have been lower by between 0.8 and 1.2 percentage points annually.

Enlargement also has important implications for Polish-American economic relations and more broadly transatlantic relations. Continued economic growth in the new member countries will mean a larger and more affluent market with increased export and investment opportunities for United States (US) firms.

Enlargement will benefit US exporters by eliminating the preferential tariff treatment accorded to the EU countries under the Europe Agreements. Poland adopted the Common External Tariff, which is generally lower than the previous most favored nation (MFN) tariffs applied to the United States. This should widen the access to the Polish market for industrial goods imported from outside the EU, or 25 percent of the country’s total foreign purchases.

EU membership brought about the harmonization of health, safety and related standards of the new members with EU norms. This process is especially favorable to those US firms, which already operate in the European market and meet many EU standards. On the other hand, new EU member states had to accept those uniform rules, which the United States regards as unfair barriers to trade (e.g. EU directives on genetically modified organisms).

American investors are already profiting from the economic stability generated by the enlargement process. Transparency, well-established property rights, protection against corruption, effective mechanisms for dispute resolution are in the interest of US investors.

Poland in the European Union: New Environment, New Challenges

Overall, however, membership in the European Union will bring substantial changes in the life of both the Polish society and state. The sphere of foreign policy is no exception. Some experts believe this sphere will be one of the most “affected” areas of the state’s operations. Many even pose the dramatic question of whether Poland will maintain former policies or enter a completely new era in its international relations.

It seems fair to assume that we will see more of a continuation rather than diversion in the main thrust of Polish foreign policy in the future. However, I would like to point out several elements that will play a significant role in the development of our foreign policy.

First, the line separating domestic and foreign agendas is becoming increasingly blurred. Integration with the EU has introduced many “common European policies” into domestic affairs, subjecting them to supranational regulators. For instance, the Common Agriculture Policy has become the main framework for developing Poland’s agricultural
sector. In a sense, this policy is no longer only European but also Polish. The same can be said about the remaining sectors of our economy. Consequently, the management of all these diverse areas, which used to be a prerogative of domestic institutions, now requires the input of our European partners. This process has led to “an internationalization” of Poland’s economy and opened it to direct debate on the European level.

Second, we have been witnessing a “democratization” of the decision making process that deals with foreign policy. This sphere can no longer be seen as solely the domain of experts and diplomats. Foreign policy will become more and more influenced by groups, representing different segments of the society and economy. Public opinion and the media also will influence external relations. Society expects certain tangible benefits, which should result from cooperation with our international partners. For example, there is a strong interest in easing travel restrictions and receiving more opportunities to study and work aboard. Those who are to shape the future of Poland’s foreign policy have to be prepared to address these growing expectations. They also must be able to accurately explain that some of their expectations cannot realistically be attained in the short-term.

Third, we may experience an increased difficulty in attaining consensus in the realm of foreign policy. This situation can result from the widening scope of issues covered by such a policy and the increasing number of the domestic institutions engaged in it. The foreign policy of the last fifteen years has enjoyed wide support across all political parties. Hardly any significant opposition to the two major goals of NATO and EU membership existed, despite frequent leadership changes in the country. Now, Poland will face the important task of coordinating all the aspects of its foreign policy in order to incorporate the interests of a wide range of players under a single umbrella of strategic national interest.

Fourth, EU membership brings with it the dilemma of ceding national sovereignty to supranational organizations. As the European Union continues to grow, more and more of the decisions affecting the everyday lives of our citizens will be made by European bodies. Many Poles, who have only recently regained their independence, may see this in a controversial light. As this phenomenon becomes more visible in the coming years, we must not simply write it off as an added expense to living in an increasingly interdependent environment. Debates and discussions must be held to ensure that our citizens understand their options and comprehend the consequences resulting from them.

Fifth, Poland’s position on the international scene will depend not only on its political and economic power, but also on its capabilities to form alliances, especially within Euro-Atlantic institutions. The ability to compromise will be crucial. We must realize that no nation is likely to fulfill one hundred percent of its goals.

Polish-American Relations

The development of Polish-American relations has been a priority for Polish governments since the collapse of Communism. Traditionally, relations are dominated by strong cooperation in international security. This reflects a convergence in the assessment
of the challenges facing the international community as well as the shared values upon which the policies of both countries are built.

Poland agrees that a new Iraq through building an open and democratic society, respecting the rights of ethnic and religious groups as well as providing fair economic conditions for its citizens, may become a good model for other Middle Eastern nations. If “peace” is won in Iraq, a democratic transformation of the Middle East will become more real. That’s why, not only did Poland decide to send combat troops to Iraq, but also committed 2,500 soldiers to the stabilization forces and assumed command over the international division. Poland also has been a strong advocate for the involvement of the international community in Iraq. We welcome the decision of NATO to assume a greater responsibility in this country, especially in the training of Iraqi security forces. Poland considers its participation in this operation as an investment in international security. Our contribution to the operation in Iraq also sends a strong message that Poland is a trustworthy and reliable ally and takes its international obligations seriously.

Just like the United States, Poland considers NATO as the key element of cooperation in maintaining security in the transatlantic area. In our view, whatever recommendations for NATO’s role in a new geopolitical environment might be, it should be clear that the Alliance is capable of acting as an organization dedicated to a collective defense. NATO also has served as an important pillar of political and military cooperation to strengthen stability on the continent. It is crucial that it continues its mission. Poland also recognizes the necessity for NATO to transform itself in order to remain relevant in the era of new threats, including combating international terrorism.

Moreover, the Alliance remains a fundamental framework for maintaining transatlantic relations by keeping the United States involved in Europe and by providing the means for sharing responsibilities between Americans and Europeans.

The achievement of a new quality in Polish-American relations encourages us to consolidate and strengthen these bilateral ties, so that they will become a permanent element of broader transatlantic relations. There is an important momentum in the contacts between our countries, which should be seized in order to make it reality.

The United States has been actively assisting in the transformation of the Polish armed forces since the beginning of the 1990s. The most recent example of cooperation in this sphere is the purchase of 48 modern F-16 multi-role aircraft. Poland also is keenly interested in upgrading its air-lift capabilities, so that the Polish armed forces will be better prepared to perform missions outside of the country.

American investors played a pioneering role in the transformation of the Polish economy. We would like to see even more American companies in the Polish market, which after EU enlargement has become a part of the most powerful economic space in the contemporary world. We hope that the American offer of multi-billion dollar investments, which accompanies the F-16 contract, will contribute towards reinvigorating the economic relations between both countries.
We should encourage a more robust scientific cooperation. Our intention is not only to increase the number of participants in scientific exchange, but also to magnify the flow of ideas between Poland and the United States. We would like more Polish academics to have a first-hand experience of American science and culture, so that the ties linking Poles and Americans will become stronger.

Another important issue, which recently attracted a great deal of public attention in Poland, is the enhancement of the freedom of movement between our countries. It would be proper to include Poland in the group of countries, whose citizens are not required to have visas while traveling to the United States. Meanwhile, before it happens, we would welcome lowering the fees and easing the existing procedures. Poland understands the imperative of protecting borders and controlling the inflow of visitors in the aftermath of September 11. The way the United States is perceived—as an open and friendly country for Poles, a source of inspiration and ideas—will not remain indifferent to the future of Polish-American cooperation. It has become an even more urgent issue, since Poles have already had an opportunity to travel freely to EU countries.

Conclusion

Advancing transatlantic links has remained one of the pillars of Polish foreign policy. Terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001, and their aftermath revealed growing differences between America and some European countries in response to this new kind of threat. A debate over the assessment of danger that Saddam Hussein’s regime posed to the international community sparked even more disagreements on both sides of the Atlantic and generated a sharp division in Europe.

The rifts that appeared in the transatlantic relationship caused deep concern in Poland. Since Polish foreign policy is constructed on the premise of a solid transatlantic foundation, such developments posed a serious challenge. Instinctively, Poland refused to accept a situation, which would force us to choose between strategic cooperation with the United States and “loyalty” to the European Union. We are convinced that, while disagreements between allies are “natural” phenomena, it can be persuasively argued that what makes the transatlantic community unique and strong offsets a reason for rivalry.

As a close friend and ally of the United States and a member of the European Union, Poland is destined to be a litmus test of the quality of the transatlantic alliance. Not everything in this scope depends on us. Whether we are able to succeed depends also on the changing relations between major players on both sides of the Atlantic. Strengthening transatlantic ties, bridging gaps in cooperation between Europe and America will help to prove that Poland’s choice has been right. Widening the rifts will be a serious obstacle in achieving this goal. One thing, however, should be beyond any doubt: Poland is ready to use all recourse to prove that being “a good European and a good friend to the United States” is not only possible but also contributes to the endurance of this unique alliance.