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Poland's Road to the European Union: The State of the Enlargement Process after the 2001 September Elections*

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Summary

The author thinks that the consensus that used to exist in Poland regarding its membership in the European Union does no longer exist after the parliamentary elections in September of 2001. Two anti-European parties entered the parliament: the radical-populist *Self-defense* and the *League of Polish Families*, representing the fundamentalist Catholic right. The author claims that the opponents of the Polish integration into the EU are too weak in the Parliament to stop this process. Though Poland enjoys the support of the states such as Germany, France and Great Britain, the outcome of the Polish referendum on joining the EU, scheduled for the end of 2003 is far from certain. The reason for this is an intensified political campaign of the parliamentary parties opposed to Poland's EU membership and the unfavourable economic situation. The author concludes that the success of the referendum to a large extent depends on the efficiency of the government's economic policy in the first two years of its term.

Key words: Poland, European Union, referendum on joining EU, elections, parliament, political parties, populism



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After the last parliamentary election (of 23 September 2001) the leader of the victorious Left and presently the new Prime Minister of Poland Leszek Miller declared that becoming one of the new members of the European Union in its next enlargement would constitute the most important goal of the Polish government. Though the task is not new, the situation in which Poland is awaiting the EU enlargement is in many ways new and complicated.

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The changing political situation and the European integration

From the very beginning of the democratic transformation, all successive Polish governments actively sought co-operation with, and eventually membership in, the European Union. On 19 September 1989, Poland and the European Community signed the agreement on trade and economic co-operation and on 16 December 1991, the European Agreement on association of Poland with the European Community and its members was also signed. On 9 May 1993, Poland obtained the status of an associated partner of the West European Union. On 8 April 1994 Poland officially applied for membership in the European Union. On 26 July 1996, the Polish government submitted to the European Commission its answers to the lengthy questionnaire containing questions relevant to the evaluation of Poland's preparation for this membership. On 8 August 1996, the law on the formation of the Committee on European Integration was adopted by the Polish Parliament. Prime Minister Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz became the chairman of the Committee assuring a high level of political responsibility for the work of this body. In January 1997, the Council of Ministers submitted to the Parliament its official document on "National Strategy of Integration". In July 1997 the European Commission invited Poland to enter the negotiations on EU membership.

In September 1997, following the defeat of the then ruling coalition of the Alliance of Democratic Left (SLD) and the Polish People's Party (PSL), the new Centre-Right Cabinet of Prime Minister Jerzy Buzek commenced the prolonged negotiations concerning the terms of the enlargement. Within the governing coalition of the Electoral Action Solidarity and the Union of Freedom the dominant orientation was strongly in favour of the enlargement. This was particularly true of the Union of Freedom, whose leader Bronisław Geremek became Poland's new foreign minister. Within the Electoral Action Solidarity there existed, however, a Eurosceptical minority, represented particularly by the Christian National Alliance. This minority was unable to stop the process of negotiations but quite effectively prolonged them by insisting on the conditions unacceptable for the European Union. Two issues in particular became the bone of contention: the length of time after which foreigners would be able to buy land in Poland and the waiting period for Polish workers to obtain the permission to work in the other EU countries. In May 2000, the Union of Freedom withdrew its ministers from the government because of a number of domestic disagreements not related to the European integration. Governing by means of a minority cabinet, Jerzy Buzek was unable to effectively control the Eurosceptical wing in the governing bloc. The result was that Poland began to lag behind the other Central European states in the process of European negotiations. One of the paradoxes of this situation was that Poland – along with the Czech Republic and Hungary – became a new NATO member in March of 1999, thereby achieving a higher level of political and military integration with the West than most postcommunist states. Some critics of the European integration even argued that as a member of NATO Poland did not need membership in the EU so badly. It should be remembered, however, that in late 1990s, in Poland – unlike in the Czech Republic and Hungary – the parties opposed to the European integration remained outside the Parliament and the support for the EU was stronger than in the two other Central European states which together with Poland had been admitted to NATO (Neumayer, 1998: 75-117).

The situation changed recently following the parliamentary elections of 23 September 2001. The election was a disaster for the parties that had won the 1997 election. Both the Electoral Action Solidarity and the Union of Freedom failed to reach the legally required threshold for the election to *Sejm* (the lower house). The winner of the election was the Left. The results were as follows:

a) Lower House (*Sejm*)

Alliance of Democratic Left – Union of Labour	41.04% (216 seats)
Citizens Platform	12.68% (65 seats)
Self-defense	10.20 % (53 seats)
Law-and-Justice	9.50% (44 seats)
Polish People's Party	8.98 % (42 seats)
League of Polish Families	7.87% (38 seats)
German Minority	(2 seats)

b) Senate

Alliance of Democratic Left – Union of Labour	75 senators
Bloc Senate 2001	15 senators
Polish People's Party	4 senators
Self-defense	2 senators
League of Polish Families	2 senators
Others	2 senators ¹

The new Cabinet headed by the leader of the SLO Leszek Miller is based on the three-party coalition of the SLO, the Union of Labour and the PSL. It is strongly committed to the European integration and already in its first weeks in office has modified Poland's integration strategy by adopting a more flexible negotiating position on the controversial issues of the sale of land and access to the European labour market. The last Prime Minister of the Left-of-Center Cabinet, Włodzimierz Cimoszewicz, became Poland's new minister of foreign affairs. He instantly undertook the initiative to revise Poland's negotiating position and to expedite the process of accession.

The last election had, however, a paradoxical effect on the process of Poland's integration with the EU. On the positive side, there is now a strong governing coalition committed to the policy of constructive dialogue with the European Union and to entering the EU in 2004. The fact that most of the key states of the EU are now governed by social democrats makes it much easier for the new Polish government to speed up the negotiations. Miller's and Cimoszewicz's visits to Brussels and to the capitals of the

¹ "Bloc Senate 2001" was an ad hoc coalition of candidates from the Electoral Action Solidarity, the Union of Freedom, the Citizens Platform, the Law-and-Justice and the independents from Center-Right. Election to the Senate is based on a plurality system without thresholds.

key European states resulted in a strong support for Poland's efforts to join the Union in the nearest wave of enlargement. The policy of integration is strongly supported by President Aleksander Kwasniewski whose reelection in October 2000 made his political position even stronger than before. In the Parliament, the government can count on the largest party of the opposition (Citizens Platform) in implementing the policy of European integration.

There is, however, the other side of the coin. The elections of 2001 brought to the Parliament – for the first time – two openly anti-European parties: the radical populist *Samoobrona* (“Self-defense”) and the League of Polish Families – a new party of the fundamentalist Catholic Right. In the Sejm they do not have enough seats to block the process of integration but enough to make the opposition to it visible. The previous consensus of the Polish political elite on the issue of the European integration no longer exists. Since Poland is due to vote on the integration in the national referendum tentatively scheduled for late 2003, it is reasonable to predict that this issue will become the crucial cleavage in Poland's politics.

Polish public opinion on European integration

In recent years, the support for the European integration in Poland has been diminishing rather rapidly. In May 1996, the major public opinion survey centre (CBOS-Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej) asked its respondents how they would vote in a hypothetical referendum on Poland's membership in NATO and the European Union. 83% of the respondents declared that they would vote for the membership in NATO and 80% that they would vote for the EU membership. Since then, the support for NATO has remained high, even after the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in early 1999, but the support for Poland's integration with the EU has been going down. In April 1997, 72% of CBOS respondents declared their readiness to vote for the EU, 11% declared that they would vote against (with 17% undecided or saying that they would not vote at all). In April 1998, CBOS registered a further decline of the support, with only 62% of respondents declaring that they would vote for the EU membership, 12% declaring that they would vote against it, and 26% undecided or abstaining. Another survey research centre, Institute for Public Affairs, confirmed these findings. In its survey of February 1998 64% of respondents declared they support for Poland's membership in the EU, but in June 1998 only 58% still supported this option, with 21% undecided, 10% opposed and 11% abstaining. The downward trend continues. In the OBOP (Osrodek Badania Opinii Publicznej) survey conducted in September 2001 only 50% declared that they would vote for Poland's membership in the EU, 30% were opposed and 20% had no opinion. Among the oldest respondents (60 and over) only 39% were in favour of the integration. Among peasants 65% respondents declared that they would vote against the integration and only 16% were for it.

After the election, another survey conducted by the PBS (Pracownia Badan Społecznych) for the daily *Rzeczpospolita* found that only 49% of the respondents were ready to vote for Poland's accession to the EU, 13% declared their intent to vote against, 19% declared that they would not vote in the referendum, and the remaining 19% that they were undecided (Europejski barometer, 2001). The sociological profiles of the support-

ers and the opponents of the accession showed that the men were more likely to support it than the women, the older people less likely to support it than the younger ones. Education was positively correlated with the willingness to vote for, and social groups frustrated with their economic situation (small farmers, pensioners, unskilled workers) were less likely to support the integration than the social groups that have benefited from the transformation.

These findings confirm the results of the earlier CBOS poll of April 1998 which studied in depth the character of the support and the opposition to Poland's membership in the European Union. It identified the following main fears: harmful effects on the agriculture (mentioned by 54% of the respondents), foreigners buying land in Poland (64% against foreigners buying agricultural land, 71% against foreigners buying forests, and 51% against foreigners buying houses in Poland), and the adaptation to the laws of the Union (considered by 44% of respondents as "difficult"). Interestingly enough, ideological issues (such as "Christian values", national sovereignty) were mentioned by significantly fewer respondents (13%) (CBOS, 1998).

In its 1998 survey the Centre introduced a scale measuring the relative intensity of support or opposition to the European integration. The scale was composed of five pairs of statements, to which respondents could respond by expressing their support or opposition on a scale from 1 (strongest support for the integration) to 7 (strongest opposition). The statements were as follows:

- 1) "For Poland it would be good to become a member of the EU as soon as possible" versus: "For Poland it would be best to become a EU member at the latest possible time";
- 2) "For Poland it would be most beneficial to adjust quickly and completely its laws to the laws of the European Union" versus "For Poland it would be best to adopt the longest possible transitory policy";
- 3) "Integration of Poland with the EU will bring Poland more benefits than damage" versus "Integration of Poland with the EU will bring Poland more damage than benefits";
- 4) "Integration of Poland with the EU for me personally will bring more benefits than damage" versus "Integration of Poland with the EU for me personally will bring more damage than benefits";
- 5) "Poland will benefit from its EU membership more than the member states of the Union" versus "The EU member states will benefit from the Polish membership in the EU more than Poland".

The number of points obtained by individual respondents (from 5 to 35) were divided by 5 (the number of responses) and the respondents were assigned their individual scores from 1 (most proeuropean) to 7 (least proeuropean). The respondents strongly supportive of the European integration (1-3 points on the scale) constituted 37% of the sample, middle-roaders (3-5 points) constituted 45%, and the opponents of the integration (5-7 points) only 18%. However, in the middle category only 60% declared their willingness to vote for the membership in the EU, and in the category of the opponents

49% declared that they would vote against the integration. With the possibility that the public opinion may evolve in the direction of greater scepticism, the potential support for the membership may dwindle even further.

The CBOS survey allows also to construct sociological profiles of the supporters and the opponents of the integration. The support for the European integration is positively correlated with education, socio-economic status, better economic conditions, living in cities over 100,000 inhabitants, and negatively correlated with age. The opposition to the integration is strongest among people over 65 years of age, living in the countryside and working in agriculture, the people with the lowest income and education. The support for the integration is stronger among the respondents who declare rightist political preferences than among those of the leftist views – a possible consequence of the overrepresentation of poorer people among the supporters of the Left. In terms of general attitudes, the supporters of the integration tend to be more optimistic than the opponents. One may conclude that the support is stronger among the winners than among the losers of the democratic transformation and the transition to the market economy.

Perspectives for the future

The prospects of Poland's integration depend on the state of negotiations and on the state of public mind in Poland. The first aspect is much easier to predict. The new governing coalition considers the admission of Poland in the first wave of enlargement as the national priority. It is free from those internal pressures which made the Buzek Cabinet deadlocked in its negotiation strategy which seriously jeopardized the prospect of Poland's integration. The opponents of the integration are too weak in the Parliament to effectively stop the process. The governments of the member states, particularly the biggest ones – Germany, the United Kingdom and France – support Poland's early admission so strongly that it is virtually guaranteed that Poland will be among the very first countries to be admitted.

Provided Poland remains committed to achieving this goal. If the referendum took place today, the majority of voters would vote for the integration, but the margin would probably be small. Many of those who declare their lack of opinion do this for the opportunistic reasons of *political correctness*. They will most likely vote against the integration if they decide to take part in the vote.

There are two dangers for the eventual vote. First, the opponents of the integration have received – for the first time – a strong platform in the Parliament from which they are now able to conduct their campaign more effectively. While they lack a sufficient number of votes in the Parliament to sabotage the process of integration, they can benefit from their role in the parliamentary life to intensify their public campaign. Launching it from the Parliament gives them two advantages: a privileged access to the media and the respectability. Their campaign may become more effective.

The second danger stems from the economic situation. The Cabinet of the Right left the economy in a much worse state than it inherited in 1997. The annual rate of GNP growth went down from over 6% to less than 2% and the unemployment went up from

10 to 16 percent, reaching the alarming figure of more than three million people. The inflation went down too – from over 14 percent to a little more than 5 percent – but the cost of it was the slowing down of economic growth. Because of the costly reforms of territorial administration, public health, education and pensions, the deficit in state finances reached an alarming level. In the first half of 2001 the minister of finance disclosed that the deficit in the state finances reached the level of over 80 billion Polish zlotys (20 billion US dollars), almost half of the annual state budget. He was promptly removed from office but this could not alter the dramatic situation. After the September election, the new Cabinet presented a package of decisions aimed at avoiding the collapse of public finances. The measures are stringent. The taxes (both personal and VAT) will go up and the public expenditures will be reduced. The accumulated effects of the economic slow-down and of the lower budget will lead to the decline in the standard of living for the great majority of Poles at least in the first one or two years.

When this happens barely two years before the referendum, there is a serious danger that the difficult economic situation may tip many voters either to vote against the integration or to abstain. The correlation between the personal well-being and the support for the integration, observed in all sociological surveys in Poland, indicates that the worsening of the economic situation may further reduce the support for the integration. Leszek Miller and his ministers are aware of such danger. They realise that the public relations alone, much as they are needed, will not be able to persuade Poles to vote for if they come to the polling stations deeply frustrated. The success of the referendum will depend largely on the effects of the government policies in the first two years of the present parliamentary term.

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