



Austro-French Centre
for rapprochement in Europe



French Institute
of international relations

Synthesis of the international conference*

The Polish Presidency of the EU Council: Challenges and Opportunities

organised in Warsaw on December, 5th 2011

Since July, 1st 2011, Poland is presiding over the Council of the European Union (EU). This Presidency takes place in an international context that is particularly difficult. In economic and financial matters, the EU faces a dramatic crisis, which will not be resolved overnight. In geopolitical matters, it has been confronted to thorny issues, which revealed the Union's weaknesses. The Arab Springs, the intervention in Libya, and other events in Iran, Ukraine and Belarus have designed new realities at the periphery of the Union, and new challenges too. In order to succeed, the Union will have to overcome the internal divergences that have hampered its capacity to (re)act over the past few months, and above all, to develop a vision that is genuinely European. A closer look at the East, through the prism of the Polish Presidency may here be more than useful, given the dynamism and the creativity of Poland on the European scene. Hence the following questions: How to assess the Polish Presidency? What responses does Poland offer to solve the financial crisis? What perspectives should the EU offer to its Eastern partners in order to anchor them in Europe? And what developments can we imagine matters of European security and defence?

It is in order to discuss these questions that the Austro-French Centre for Rapprochement in Europe (CFA/OeFZ) and the French Institute of international relations (Ifri) have chosen to organise an international conference in Warsaw, on December, 5th 2011. This conference echoes a previous event, organised in April 2011 in Budapest, on the Hungarian Presidency. The organisation of this conference has been supported by the Polish Institute for International Affairs (PISM), the French Embassy to Warsaw, the French Cultural Institute, the Austrian Embassy to Warsaw and the Austrian Cultural Forum. The conference has successfully met the interest of the participants, the wide audience and the media. Most of the contributions to the conference can be consulted on the Austro-French Centre's website: www.oefz.at.

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Introduction

This short synthesis is based on the arguments formulated by the participants. An extended version (with all the references) is provided in French on the Austro-French Centre's website: www.oefz.at.

1. The Polish Presidency

Unlike the Czech and Hungarian Presidencies, marked by peaking domestic Euroscepticism, the Polish Presidency has been driven by pro-European public opinions and Europhile elites. Nationalists have been marginalised, and their voice did not find much echo abroad. Besides, Poland could benefit from its economic dynamism, and thus engaged in EU affairs unconstrained by domestic turmoil. The international context of the Polish Presidency, however, did not prove as clement. The financial crisis has dominated the EU's agenda, and as a matter of fact, Poland's too. In geopolitical matters, the war in Libya pinpointed the EU's limitations in military cooperation, and with regards to Syria, its leadership is not outstanding. In all, the Polish Presidency often reacted to international events of dramatic importance, and barely succeeded in setting its own agenda. Often too, it remained silent, at least until Radosław Sikorski's speech in Berlin in November. In its address, Poland's Foreign Minister underlined the need to deepen the integration of the EU in economic matters and showed the way –that of European federalism. This remarkable speech illustrates very well Poland's increasingly Europeanist attitude towards world affairs.

Considering this twofold context, how to assess the Polish Presidency? For Poland, this Presidency has been the occasion to promote the image of the country in Europe, to gain in international visibility, and to foster the modernisation of its bureaucracy. The Polish Presidency has also brought significant progresses abroad. It has elaborated the accession Treaty of Croatia, sustained efforts at keeping the Eastern Partnership high on the EU's agenda, and thereby promoted democratisation in the East. Poland has supported the extension of the EU's neighbourhood policy to Belarus, backed Ukrainian and Belarusian activists in their political opposition to the regimes, and worked at the foundation of a European Endowment for Democracy. It has contributed to the regional integration of energy markets in the East by advocating the opening of cross-border pipelines, and in European security matters, it has formulated several initiatives, which have not always received the attention they deserved.

Overall, the Polish Presidency has achieved positive results, despite a difficult international context. But it also failed to meet some expectations. First, it acted with little cautious by responding affirmatively to the Belorussian authorities' request for gaining information on Belorussian activists in Poland (resulting in the arrest of Ales Bielacki). Also, the Schengen area has not been extended to Bulgaria and Romania; and Poland did not find a common ground with Ukraine on the conclusion of an Association Agreement (Ioulia Tymochenko's case); nor it could not ensure the participation of Belarus to the Eastern Partnership Summit it organised.

2. The economic and financial crisis

As the financial crisis looms over the EU, catastrophist prophecies are on the rise, boosted by the media's taste for striking headlines and politicians' electoral agendas. Yet, actions against the financial turmoil should not make the economy of reflection. The case of Poland may here be interesting to consider. Its significant growth (4% in 2011) and its rising competitiveness contrast with the more fragile situation of Western European member states. The relative prosperity in Poland is first and foremost the result of the reforms the country has initiated in the past decade, but also stems from the industrial foundations of its economy, which have not been replaced by services only, the attractiveness of its domestic market and its public debt, which has been kept under control. These assets make Poland a regional leader in Eastern Europe and a serious candidate for the euro.

The priorities of Poland in European economic matters go beyond the coordination of member states' fiscal policies. It also supports the consolidation of the EU's internal market, including with regards to the free circulation of Europeans; the constitution of an EU's energy market, in order to improve the Europeans' position in international negotiations; and the vitalisation of the EU's external trade. In economic matters, it is important to note that the EU can now count on its new member states as a significant source of growth. But in the long run, it will have to consider re-industrialising its economy, deepening its economic governance and releasing the next generations (whose demography is declining) from the current burden of its debt.

3. The Eastern Partnership and energy cooperation

The Eastern partnership is a regional initiative proposed by Poland and Sweden in 2008 and adopted by the EU in 2009. It supports a relatively pragmatic approach to the challenges Eastern states neighbouring the EU now face, most notably in terms of modernisation, democratisation and rule of law. Conducted in the framework of the Neighbourhood Policy of the EU towards six non-EU member states from the post-Soviet space (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine et Belorussia), the Eastern Partnership primarily aims at reinforcing the political and economic relationship between those countries and the EU. It also supports them in their reform process through Europeanisation and on the basis of limited financial resources.

Unlike the enlargement policy of the EU, the Eastern Partnership neither excludes, nor includes accession perspectives. The inclination of the six partners participating in the EU initiative, however, is far from consensually oriented towards accession. Since the Eastern Partnership treats the six participating states in the same manner, notwithstanding their differences, this "one-size-fit- them -all" recipe may turn into a source of tensions. Making use of a differentiated approach, within a single institutional design, would help promoting the EU's values more effectively. But EU officials should also make sure that their propositions are well-understood. In all, the Eastern Partnership will help consolidating the EU's periphery by fostering inter-linkages with the EU, exchanges of ideas and best practices, as well as joint cross-border projects, e.g. in energy matters.

In energy matters, precisely, the Union should head towards the constitution of a common market, especially in gas. Today, its market remains fragmented and little diversified, despite considerable consumption levels. This situation is beneficial to Russia, which applies a differentiated approach in its contracts with the EU member states. Prices for gas in Europe are, as a result, relatively high in average, and for some member states, they are higher than on the spot prices. It also fuels the EU's energy dependence on Russia. The EU should therefore seek to diversify its supply, e.g. by importing more liquefied natural gas (LNG). Poland makes here an important contribution: it builds a LNG terminal, which will be connected to regional energy networks through the North-South Corridor V4 and several inter-connectors (now operational or in planning). The EU should finally explore the possibility to draw from new sources of energy, which it can produce domestically. Poland is for instance willing to carry out experimental tests on the exploitation of shale gas.

4. Poland and the European security and defence policy (ESDP)

Despite the financial crisis, which results in budgetary constraints throughout Europe, the strengthening of the EU's security and defence policy is as necessary as ever. This priority echoes the EU's will to act as a global player in security matters, starting by taking up its share of the burden in ensuring security on the European continent. The EU should thus become more involved in Europe's frozen conflicts, and react to the diversification of the United States' interests by cooperating more closely within the ESDP. Cooperation among Europeans will be all the more needed since the world witnesses profound mutations in the field of international security: new actors, new threats and new challenges have emerged, and demand an innovative response from the side of the EU.

Unfortunately, the EU's security and defence policy (ESDP) has had little reality hitherto. Although the EU is equipped with an institutional architecture (Political and Security Committee, European Defence Agency...) and with the technical capabilities to cooperate (interoperability), the EU has been blocked in the implementation of its security and defence policy e.g. in Libya). This unfortunate limitation stems from a threefold failure: first, the institutionalist idea that creating institutions will suffice to make the ESDP functional did not prove valid; second, generating capabilities (e.g. Battlegroups) did not mean that these would be deployed; and finally, political cooperation did not perform well, as cross-national differences in terms of overall vision in security matters and in doctrine undermine the fundamentals of cooperation.

Thence, the following recommendations can be made: first, it is important to re-design the ESDP by taking into account the universality of the claim for security (a global commons). Then, the EU should define more specifically its strategic priorities, rather than pursuing its all-embracing objectives. Here, the member states should pay more attention to the normative foundations upon which they want to anchor their common actions. In the absence of a common vision for European security, the EU will most surely remain blocked. At the capability level, the EU should be wary of the falling

defence budgets of its member states, which could jeopardise their armies' operationality. Considering the size of the Battlegroups, the EU should also keep in mind that developing an integrated commandment structure may not be as grounded as it seems. Such structures are best adapted to plentiful resources. The EU should conversely dedicate more efforts at developing industrial projects that are properly European. Finally, when pooling and sharing is too difficult to achieve, the EU should seek to utilise the existing structures, by extending and deepening its links with other international organisations (e.g. Nato).