

Brexit's Potential Implications for Poland's Position in the EU

Written by Karol Chwedczuk-Szulc

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KAROL CHWEDCZUK-SZULC, AUG 9 2016

The result of the British referendum on Brexit resonates in Poland, just as it does all over Europe and around the world. From the Polish perspective, the main issue seems to be the future of the nearly 800,000 members of the Polish diaspora in the UK, many of whom went there after EU enlargement in 2004. [i] Experts tend to stress that the Polish government has just lost its most powerful ally within the group of Euroskeptical governments, which Poland joined after the 2015 autumn parliamentary elections. What seems to be missing from these post-referendum analyses is that the governing Law and Justice party, *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (PiS), shows no signs of having any plan or strategy as to what to do next – just like the British politicians who campaigned for Leave.

First of all, the result of the legally non-binding Brexit referendum encourages ambiguity, as it is unclear when and if the separation will occur. Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty dictates that Brexit procedures will be initiated only when (and if) the British Prime Minister notifies Brussels. That, in turn, can only happen if the British Parliament agrees to proceed and it is unlikely that Brexiters will have a majority in the House of Commons. Moreover, Brexit could, and probably will, seriously endanger the unity of the United Kingdom, as Northern Ireland and especially Scotland are voicing very clearly their intentions of staying within the EU. The willingness of British politicians to pursue the intended divorce may be seriously cooled if either country attempts to leave the UK. In Britain, there is, however, a clear tradition of *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*. [ii] Therefore, we should not assume that Brexit will not happen, though British politicians seem reluctant to set in motion the procedures envisaged by Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty. Even adamant pro-Brexiters Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson stated that there is no rush.

Polish Reactions to the Referendum

The official reaction of the Polish authorities was that Brexit would be something negative. President Andrzej Duda addressed the concerns of Polish emigrés who left Poland for the UK in search of better job opportunities after Poland joined the EU in 2004. They, and their families, are afraid that Brexit will mean they may have to leave. Duda expressed hopes that the British would recognize the contributions of Polish immigrants to the British economy, and that the rights of Polish citizens in Britain would remain intact.

At the same time, Prime Minister Beata Szydło stated that attitudes towards Poland had been changing as Poland was increasingly recognized as an important player in the EU. [iii] PiS has been using this narrative for years, claiming that Poland has been treated unfairly in the EU and has had too little a say in Brussels. Szydło is trying to capitalize on Brexit by arguing that the EU has to deal more carefully with countries like Poland, which are, like Britain, skeptical of deepening integration. Szydło's statement goes against the widely held opinion that Poland's international prestige and influence have actually deteriorated under Szydło's government.

Nevertheless, the most symptomatic, and most important, reaction came from Jarosław Kaczyński (chairman of PiS, holds no official position in government), who some consider the real leader of Poland. Kaczyński stated that Brexit is the EU's fault, and especially that of former Polish Prime Minister and current President of the European Council Donald Tusk. To his mind, the Brexit vote might not have happened had the EU not broken its own commitment to subsidiarity. Kaczyński believes the EU to be hostile towards member states (especially the smaller and less

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powerful ones like Poland). He also suggested that there should be personal consequences for the EU leadership and especially Tusk because "he is responsible for Brexit and should disappear".

Kaczyński's most important conclusion was that Europe needed less integration and more respect for the sovereignty of member states. In Kaczyński's view, this requires a new European treaty because the Lisbon Treaty will only lead to more "exits", as deeper integration encourages backlash. He has even repeatedly, and enigmatically, stated that he has asked "a very important lawyer" to draw up a proposal for such a new treaty. Additionally, Kaczyński admitted that PiS has no strategy as to how to react to Brexit, just an *ad hoc* plan to prevent the UK from leaving (e.g. by triggering a second referendum in the UK).

The Polish opposition has focused on pointing out that the government is indolent in foreign policy and that choosing the UK as the main ally within the EU, together with Viktor Orbán's Hungary, was a big mistake. Not only does it weaken European solidarity, but it also pushes Poland further away from the decision-making core of the EU. Others stress that the EU could see the rise of Euroscepticism in other member states (France, Holland, Italy) and, with the exception of PiS, the broad consensus has been that Russia will be the biggest beneficiary of Brexit. The more divided the EU, the weaker it will be, and the more room there is for Russia to foster further division amongst Member States.

Conclusion

The reactions of Polish authorities to Britain's referendum demonstrate a kind of *ad hoc*-cracy. As Kaczyński admitted, the government has no strategic foreign policy plan. This attitude is not exclusive to this government, but has been a feature of all Polish cabinets since 2004. For years, integration with Western institutions (namely NATO and the EU) constituted Poland's main foreign policy concern. Since Poland joined the EU, all obvious strategic aims have been fulfilled and foreign policy has followed an *ad hoc* path.^[iv] And there is little sign that the result of Britain's referendum is changing this.

The difference with this government is that it seems to completely ignore the changing geopolitical situation of Poland. Brexit is taking place during some of the most severe crises the European Union has faced since the end of the Cold War: a rebirth of aggressive Russian imperialism, the aftermath of a global economic crisis, waves of immigration, war in Syria, terrorist threats, and a declining international attachment to the rules of liberal democracy, as the rise of populist figures like Kaczyński, Orbán, Marine Le Pen, and Farage signals.

The Brexit vote shows that the Polish government is inward-oriented, nationalist, even parochial. Though Poles regularly evoke Poland as the birthplace of the Solidarity movement (Cirtautas, 1997), PiS understands solidarity as making demands and leveling accusations of discrimination, even though no other country in the history of the Union has ever benefited financially as much as Poland has. And Poland has benefited from EU membership in many other ways as well.

Poland's "dignity policy" ("Poland is powerful, we don't need to bow before anyone") causes tensions with Poland's most obvious and important allies: the EU (especially Germany) and the US. The Polish government's support for the EU and its values is unfixed and tends to serve as justification for the pursuit of more immediate interests. PiS does not accept, and perhaps fails to understand, that the rule of law, principles of liberal democracy and human rights are part of how the Western world perceives security. Although the current government formally adheres to these values, it uses them rather as a fig leaf to mask the government's true political intentions in a kind of *Realpolitik* where only crude interests matter. This is why even the most important geopolitical developments are met with an *ad hoc* response. Polish officials are anywhere from indifferent to provocative or even aggressive. For example, the Polish ministry of foreign affairs is neglecting official correspondence from the European Commission, ignoring deadlines, and taunting German politicians with references to World War II.

As one formerly staunch supporter of PiS, Prof. Jadwiga Staniszkis stated, Kaczyński does not understand the West. Therefore, he can miss the point at which the EU will decide to take decisive action to get out of the crisis. It may be in the form of further federalization of the "core" of the EU, in which case Poland would surely be left out. And all of

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this is taking place in a country where over 80% of the population supports Poland's membership in the European Union.

Notes and References

[i] After Poland joined in 2004, Poles became the main national group to relocate to the UK. Some are concerned that the Brexit vote reflects a kind of backlash and that anti-immigrant sentiment may lead to deportations or other infringements of immigrants' rights.

[ii] "The voice of the people is the voice of God".

[iii] Szydło points to the decision of the European Parliament to postpone dealing with a breach of the rule of law in Poland.

[iv] With one small exception, when the then-PM Donald Tusk, after Russian invasion on Ukraine, proposed Energy Union for the EU. Malcolm Keay and David Buchan (2015), *Europe's Energy Union: a Problem of Governance* (accessed 07 Aug. 2016).

Cirautas, A.M., (1997). *The Polish Solidarity Movement*. New York: Routledge.

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Karol Chwedczuk-Szulc holds a PhD in Political Sciences and an MA in Sociology and International Relations. He teaches at the University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, Poland. He also served as Scholar-in-Residence at the American University in Washington, DC. Currently, his research focuses primarily on EU-US comparative studies. His publications (both scholarly and journalistic) reflect his interest in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, EU-US relations, the future of the European Union and the changing role of Poland in the international arena.