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POLISH PRESIDENCY OF THE EU COUNCIL: REACTIONS AND OPINIONS IN THE US

US media coverage of the Polish presidency

Poland took over the Presidency of the EU Council on the 1st of July, 2011 and, prior to this date, the Polish Embassy in Washington was busy long before this date to rise to the task of giving its support to Poland in the US capital. Poland's objectives and achievements contained the following: six pack agreement (a packet of five regulations and one directive bolstering economic governance in the EU and Eurozone), Single Market forum in Krakow (which, with its declaration of 20 regulatory barriers that make the Single Market difficult, helped to deepen the work meant to foster economic growth), European patent, Eastern Partnership summit (which agreed that strengthening of the Eastern partnership is a necessity), establishment of the European Endowment for Democracy to make grants for local democratic movements, and successes in the common position on energy and environment (including the adoption in September of 2011 by the General Affairs Council of the European Union's first negotiating mandate for the European Commission to hold talks with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan on trans-Caspian gas pipeline and the UN climate talks in Durban). As these achievements did not directly involve the United States it is no surprise that they did not make major headlines there.

There were relatively few US media reactions regarding Polish Presidency in the European Council. Most comments relating to Poland's rotating Presidency basically referred to the economic crisis in Europe and debate within the EU on the

future of the integration process. It is not unusual because EU stories in general are hard to make interesting for Americans. For example, not one of the main TV stations did stories on the “Yes” vote in the Irish referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, designed to update and consolidate the EU institutions. The US print media covered the story with reports which contained serious mistakes. This might be because when Americans set their priorities, they first think of problems they need to solve and except for the economic situation, Europe is not usually on the “problems list” and therefore not a priority.

In the very few US reactions, Poland was invoked however as an example of a country with a stable economic situation and the only EU country not to experience recession in the last 20 years, which helps Poland play a significant role in shaping the new economic governance. There seemed to be an emphasis on Poland’s actions aimed at stabilizing the situation in the euro area including the decision of the Polish government to provide additional financial support for the International Monetary Fund (designed to rescue the euro zone). This signaled to the Americans a fundamental change in the role of the “new” EU member states which are taking on the responsibility for the future of European integration and are ready to go beyond the role of just an aid recipient.

In the reports regarding preparations and results of the December European Council meeting, the head of the Polish government was quoted on the statements regarding European solidarity, strengthened financial security and fiscal discipline within the EU and on general Polish support for further integration of the EU. The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and several other major newspapers cited the remarkable speech given by Poland’s Foreign Minister, Radosław Sikorski in Berlin, where he urged Germany to save the euro, claiming that “he feared German inaction more than German action.” In the Washington Post this statement was used to show the special position of Germany in the face of the economic crisis and the exceptional Polish diplomacy appealing for strong leadership of Germany in Europe despite painful historical experience.

American media has also devoted some time to the meetings of the ECOFIN Council in Wrocław. There was criticism of the EU finance ministers to take concrete steps to combat the debt crisis accompanied by favorable evaluation of the actions by Polish Minister of Finance, Jacek Rostowski, who as a Chairman of the ECOFIN council, took the unprecedented step to invite to this meeting his American counter-part, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner. In their analysis concerning the negotiation on the new EU budget, American commentators pointed out the difficult task of the Polish Presidency, which must act on behalf of the 27 member states to reach a compromise and at the same time protect the interest of their own country (for example, this relates to the possibility of reducing the amount of the distribution of structural funds and the cohesion funds where Poland is a clear leader in their use, as well as to the Franco-German efforts to introduce a uniform corporate tax rate across the EU. This would potentially reduce public

spending and the attractiveness of Poland as a place to invest, which in turn would be detrimental to the economic growth of Poland).

The reports relating to the internal EU matters concerned mainly Polish Presidency's unsuccessful efforts to include Bulgaria and Romania in the Schengen plan. US media considered that restrictions on the freedom of movement of people within the EU and the Euro zone are symptoms of clear decrease in the level of trust between the member states.

In the case of foreign and security policy, US media reported primarily on the active role of Poland in eastern policy. The Warsaw Summit on the Eastern Partnership was referred to as the most important political event of the Polish presidency. The attention of the commentators also focused on the perspective of "European" Ukraine and EU/US actions towards Belarus. Poland was also seen as a leader in their efforts to sign an association agreement with Ukraine.

Polish Presidency certainly tried to be visible in Washington. It has organized several major cultural events and was a part of important meetings such as that of the EU-US Energy Council, where senior officials assembled in Washington, DC on November 28, 2011 in a meeting chaired by US Secretary of State Clinton and US Secretary of Energy Chu, EU High Representative Ashton and EU Commissioner for Energy Oettinger where Beata Stelmach, Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Undersecretary, represented Poland's Presidency of the Council.

There were also several important visits by high level Polish officials to Washington including that of Poland's Deputy Foreign Minister Krzysztof Stanowski on September 23rd, 2011 and Deputy Foreign Minister Jacek Najder's visit on September 19th. Polish Ambassador, Robert Kupiecki, also made sure to meet with Ambassador Miriam Sapiro, Deputy US Trade Representative, to discuss Poland's priorities during its Presidency.

What does the EU Council's Presidency mean to the US after the Lisbon Treaty

The Lisbon Treaty created a three-headed power. One head is that of the President of the European Council, Herman Van Rompuy, another is the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, who heads the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the last is José Manuel Durao Barroso, President of the European Commission. The three of them frequently interact with the US on the highest level and the US administration admits that the Lisbon Treaty made it simpler for the US to work together with these single individuals in their permanent positions. This new institutional scenario has left a very small space for the presidential terms, not least with regard to visibility. The EU capitals, which continue to take over the rotating Presidency of the European Union every six months, are nowadays responsible for the bulk of the technical

work of preparing the European Council of Ministers. The Presidencies are great secondary actors and the Polish Presidency was seen as such in the US.

After the reform of the Lisbon Treaty, foreign policy had been removed from the Presidency dossier to fall within the remit of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and a post-Lisbon Presidency has significantly diminished the role of the prime minister of the Member State holding the Presidency in favor of the permanent President of the European Council. Yet, the rules of cooperation with the rotating Presidency in a number of areas where the competencies overlap are still being established and developing the framework for cooperation between the EEAS and the Presidency is still a difficult task. The EEAS service at the EU Delegation in Washington really took on a coordinating role. For the Presidency it means that they lost a front seat at the table but they are still a valuable partner. The path-searching of the EEAS did not make it easy for the Polish Presidency to find their place, but already under the Belgian and the Hungarian terms, many arrangements have been cleared up and the Polish Presidency understood better where it can support and balance the work of the High Representative and the EEAS.

In this new post-Lisbon system much depends on the attitude of the country holding the Presidency because, despite the new provisions, the Treaty of Lisbon is fairly vague with regard to the roles of the rotating Presidency in external relations. This entails that the first rotating Presidencies of Lisbon have the possibility to shape new roles in the EU's external relations and this is what an ambitious Polish Presidency attempted to do. It tried to define the role of the Presidency by working out a way to collaborate with the High Representative although not in the areas directly related to the United States. Minister Radosław Sikorski and Catherine Ashton agreed on the mode of cooperation during the Polish Presidency beforehand. The Polish Minister deputized for the High Representative in matters related to democratization in the vicinity of the EU and in matters of security and defense. He also represented her during the debates at the European Parliament and also at some international meetings. It remains to be seen however how the next Presidencies will prove that the role of the rotating Presidency is still influential particularly as the field of external relations also includes issues belonging to exclusive and shared competences.

What is clear is that EU is still in transition and the Presidency's changing nature is thus not yet fully developed. The rotating Presidency still has an important role to play but its influence has shifted more towards the EU's internal level in terms of its important role of moderator and consensus-builder. The institution of the rotating Presidency still enjoys some procedural advantages, such as the chairing of the COREPER II, however the formal leadership has been severely limited. Most of the powers rely now on the close cooperation with the High Representative and EEAS in order to have the Presidency's priorities included in the agenda of the Foreign Affairs Council meetings and other working groups. Thus, the priority

shifted more towards using the inter-institutional relations, particularly with the increased role of the European Parliament. The Lisbon Treaty meant to create more coherence and consistency in the EU's external relations and to a large extent the US Administration sees the changes as helpful in their interaction with the EU. The transitional period however shows that this new set up still requires more time and cooperation to be fully effective.

It is certain that Europe is complicated and that it can be confusing not only to the US because, despite of all the reforms, the EU's institutional complexity remains. Americans however want to understand the role of various EU actors such as the rotating Presidency and they do interact with them if they have the need. At the end of the day, all policy-making in the EU still depends on the consent of member states. The US is aware of this fact and continues therefore to need strong bilateral relationships with the EU member states and all the structural actors including Presidency within the EU.

Abstract

Polska prezydencja w Radzie UE: reakcje i opinie w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Autorka prezentuje obserwacje płynące z analizy relacji amerykańsko-europejskich. Wskazuje, że amerykańskie media pilnie obserwują sytuację w Europie i są zaniepokojone kryzysem sfery euro. Obserwatorzy podkreślają, że proces globalizacji handlu powoduje, iż wszyscy partnerzy stosunków gospodarczych na świecie muszą bacznie obserwować powiązane wzajemnie reakcje międzynarodowych rynków. Należy jednak zauważyć, że Amerykanie są obecnie ukierunkowani głównie na obserwację rynków azjatyckich, przede wszystkim chińskiego, i nie stawiają problemów europejskich na czele listy *priorities* – celów, które wymagałyby natychmiastowej reakcji. Amerykańskie media dostrzegają też, że polska stabilność ekonomiczna jest niezagrożona i Polska jest jednym z niewielu krajów EU, które pozostając poza strefą euro, wypracowały sobie renomę kraju bezpiecznego dla zagranicznych inwestycji. Mimo uznania znaczenia polskich sukcesów w sprawach ekonomicznych, ze względu na typowy dla Stanów Zjednoczonych „amerykanocentryzm”, amerykańska skłonność do badania zakresu polskiego wpływu na proces decyzyjny w Radzie UE, jest jednak niewielka. Amerykanie są skupieni na własnych interesach, a w zakresie zmian w Europie – zainteresowani głównie przekształceniami strukturalnymi UE po traktacie lizbońskim. Zakres wiedzy w Stanach Zjednoczonych o skomplikowanych mechanizmach sterujących Unią Europejską, a w tym również informacja o znaczeniu polskiej prezydencji w Radzie, pozostaje jednak niewystarczający.