

### Highlights

- ★ Joining the EU and NATO was perceived as a way to escape communism and Russia's sphere of influence by quickly enhancing its national security and economic development. This view largely remains valid today, especially as the "economic catch up" it sought has been relatively fruitful.
- ★ In order to get the most out of the EU, Poland sought to act as a bridge between the EU and the Eurozone and ensure the inclusiveness of all projects of integration that could impact its future. That being said, the potential benefits of further integration appear less and less clear to the Poles.
- ★ To ensure and even increase EU's legitimacy in Poland, work should be done in four domains: preserve the freedom of movement; maintain a high level of cohesion funds for the next EU budget from 2020 onwards; fight labour insecurity; and guarantee energy security.

### Building Bridges project

This paper is part of the Building Bridges Paper Series. The series looks at how the Member States perceive the EU and what they expect from it. It is composed of 28 contributions, one from each Member State. The publications aim to be both analytical and educational in order to be available to a wider public. All the contributions and the full volume *The European Union in The Fog* are available [here](#).



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### About Building Bridges

Called "Building Bridges Between National Perspectives on the European Union", the project aims to stimulate the public debate around national experts on the relationship between their Member State and the EU and on the future of the Union. This project confronts their visions with others' from different member states, but also those of people from different horizons via workshops in Warsaw, Madrid, Paris and Brussels, which took place in 2015 gathering experts and local citizens.

The project is coordinated by the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri) with three major partners: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Real Instituto Elcano and EUROPEUM—European Institute for European Policy. The project has also benefited from the support of institutes in each Member State.

You can find all the information and publications about the project at this address: <http://www.ifri.org/en/recherche/zones-geographiques/europe/projet-building-bridges>.



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## What does your country hope to gain from its membership to the European Union?

Unlike the other Central and Eastern European states, Poland's integration into the so-called Euro-Atlantic community, through the accession to both the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 1999 and then the European Union (EU) in 2004, became a *raison d'état* that shaped its post-1989 foreign policy. These alliances were particularly perceived to be a means of escaping communism and Russia's sphere of influence by quickly enhancing its national security and economic development. This view still largely predominates among Poland's citizens and across the whole political class, not least thanks to the unexpected rapidity and scope of the general improvement of economic conditions since the accession date.<sup>1</sup> Poland's participation in the European project thus has a deeply-rooted geopolitical and security nature, and should help it to gain some leverage over its historically overbearing neighbours, namely Russia and Germany. Good examples of this include Poland's hard push to develop a strong Eastern component to the EU's neighbourhood policy back in 2009, and the Franco-Polish call to create an energy union following the onset of the Ukrainian crisis.

After closing the initial debate about Poland's "return to Europe" that characterised most of the pre-accession period,<sup>2</sup> the idea of an economic "catch up" with the biggest Member States became predominant. Despite initial fears,<sup>3</sup> EU membership has indeed constituted a remarkable opportunity to improve the living standards of many Poles hoping to "catch up", as quickly as possible, with those of, say, Germany, the United-Kingdom or France. Thanks to the sharp

increase in labour mobility that followed Poland's progressive incorporation into the Schengen zone, the level of remittances sent by Polish expatriate workers to Poland significantly increased, and could thus support many Polish households. An impact that reached a record high of 2.5% of GDP in 2006-2007.<sup>4</sup> Together with the growing export-oriented character of the Polish economy, such factors explain why Poland has been strongly supportive of the completion of the internal market. Recently, Poland's major success in negotiating the biggest envelope of EU funds ever during the negotiations on the Multiannual Financial Framework 2014-2020 (82.5 billion euros), was also used by the authorities to demonstrate their ability to negotiate important financial support for the country's future development.<sup>5</sup>

While the relations between Poland and the EU have proven to be a very contested issue between the two main political forces in recent years, namely the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS), one could argue that it remains more a competition "over which of them was most competent [in] representing and advancing Polish national interests within the Union" than a debate "about the substance of the European integration project as such".<sup>6</sup> As a matter of fact, even the most vehemently critical Polish politicians towards the EU do not propose to leave the EU, nor do they propose any alternative project outside the European framework.<sup>7</sup>

Nonetheless, it should be noted that the above-mentioned favourable conditions have not prevented a drop in trust towards the EU in Polish public opinion, which has fallen from 68% in 2007 to 41% in 2014, mirroring an EU-wide trend provoked by the economic and financial crisis. As put forward by one of the

participants of the Warsaw workshop organised in the framework of the Building Bridges project in May 2015, one could argue that Poland's support towards the EU had remained high because the country did not face any negative effects, like the Euro crisis or a significant impact from the refugee inflows.<sup>8</sup> To say it another way, "[...] many hopes have come true, while the majority of concerns have not. Nevertheless, it should not be inferred from this that the support for European integration will continue to be strong also in more challenging times."<sup>9</sup>

### **Do you think that the European Union appears to be a clear project in your country? If not, what are the main reasons?**

One participant to the Warsaw workshop described the EU as "an ongoing experiment".<sup>10</sup> This description captures well a certain sense of uncertainty in the views on the EU. It is particularly acute regarding the future of integration. Despite a general appreciation of existing benefits, possible developments remain hard to comprehend and the EU as such remains largely thought of as a distant entity. In this regard, three mutually reinforcing factors may prove useful to consider.

First, despite Poles' confidence about their knowledge of the EU,<sup>11</sup> a closer look reveals that the actual knowledge of the EU is rather low. Though a majority of Poles have heard about the EU institutions, they also declare that they do not know much about how they function.<sup>12</sup> Only 40% of them know that the European Parliament is chosen in a popular vote and 69.4% cannot name any Member of the European Parliament (MEP) from Poland.<sup>13</sup> Even though basic knowledge of the EU is part of the civic education curriculum, the final effects are not always satisfactory. In 2015, the average result of an advanced matriculation

exam in civic education was 26%.<sup>14</sup> Only 11% of students were able to name Donald Tusk's predecessor in the post of the President of the European Council.<sup>15</sup> Lack of knowledge may translate itself into a lack of interest – turnout in the 2014 European Parliament elections was only 23.83%. That is usually explained away due to both the "second order" of these elections, as well as an overall lack of interest in politics as such.<sup>16</sup>

Second, media coverage of EU affairs is very limited and many citizens think that most important issues will be communicated to them by the media.<sup>17</sup> While television remains the main source of knowledge on the EU for 71% of Poles,<sup>18</sup> it only broadcasts basic information about the most important meetings of the European Council and major events with cross-European consequences, such as the financial crisis. There is a lack of dedicated quality TV programming on EU affairs in general, and consequently the activities of the European institutions rarely receive attention. For instance, debates between the *Spitzenkandidaten* in the run-up to the 2014 European Parliament elections were not broadcast on any Polish television channels. Of course, the Internet is gaining in importance as a medium,<sup>19</sup> but, again, there are only very few Polish-language internet portals dedicated to European affairs. The government is somehow trying to compensate by including the most important information on its websites and promoting them via social media.<sup>20</sup> However, it would still require an active search to access them.

Third, and paradoxically, the above-mentioned cross-political agreement on the importance of the EU often makes it invisible in public debates, thus contributing to a lack of deeper knowledge on EU affairs. When a debate occurs, it is usually about the efficiency of Polish

initiatives and falls prey to typical criticism from the opposition parties. This unity on views, however, conceals some important differences between the two main political parties – PO and PiS – which belong to two different political groups in the European Parliament.<sup>21</sup> Also, the voices of left-wing parties are largely missing due to both a sharp decline in public support for the main left-wing party, and a still rather embryonic recognition of new political initiatives on this side of the political spectrum. Overall, these factors contribute to making Polish debates on the EU either non-existent or insubstantial in the wider public.

**Which degree of integration seems adequate to the position and ambitions of your country both politically and economically?**

Under the two terms in office of the previous liberal government (2007-2015), there was a belief that Poland would be better served by greater integration, which would help it to “punch above its weight”. As the biggest Central European state, and now the sixth biggest economy in the EU, Poland thus concentrated on initiatives that could help it to move from its initial status of periphery member to one of the EU top-dogs. For example, by capitalising on the shift of attention from Eastern to Southern members that resulted from the Eurozone crisis, Poland sought to boost its political leverage within the ultimate circle of integration, which it does not yet even belong to, namely the Eurozone.

Yet, Poland’s performance on a number of strategic dossiers - such as the 2014-2020 cohesion fund - would probably have been more complicated to achieve had it not distanced itself from the initial image of being a “recalcitrant trouble-maker unused to the structures of EU integration”.<sup>22</sup> Hence, Poland

sought to best defend its interests by acting as a bridge between the EU and the Eurozone and ensuring the inclusiveness of any projects of integration that could impact its own future. This logic was notably behind Poland’s active role in the negotiations that led to the creation of the banking union, as well as the country’s adoption of the European Fiscal Compact (Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union) in 2013, both of which allowed non-Euro members to take part if they wish to. Doing its best to counter the growing pressure from core Member States for a differentiated or “multi-speed” Europe, one of Poland’s successes was to reach some kind of balance between the “Community method” (when ensuring the necessary inclusiveness of EU institutions), the inter-governmental process (through efficient coalition-building strategies, such as with the Visegrad group: Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic), and the Weimar format (along with France and Germany).<sup>23</sup>

For the Polish people, however, the necessity and potential benefits of furthering integration appear less and less clear. A survey from July 2015 shows, for instance, that 37% of Poles seem to estimate that the level of integration with the EU should remain more or less the same, while the percentage of those who would like to integrate more or, on the contrary, loosen relations is equivalent (27% and 25% respectively).<sup>24</sup> One of the many reasons for that is probably the growing association between greater integration and the tense debate about Poland’s legal obligation to join the Eurozone as part of its accession treaty. Another one is related to the refugee crisis and growing calls for Warsaw to share the burden of the most exposed Member States.

Opinions expressed by Polish citizens during the May Warsaw workshop, particularly from younger generations, over the Euro-membership and the possibility of welcoming large numbers of refugees from the Middle East and Africa further indicated a strong hesitancy among citizens. There is, for instance, a perception among citizens that belonging to the Euro could hamper Poland's good economic results in recent years and endanger all the efforts made so far. A feeling mirrored in a June 2015 survey on this matter showing that 68% of Poles are convinced that adopting the euro would badly affect their households' finance, 51% believe that it would lead to a deterioration of the Polish economy, and 49% think that accession to the Eurozone would have a bad impact on Polish national identity.<sup>25</sup> This growing lack of public support explains why the main Polish parties remain against adopting the euro in the short and medium-term. Remarkably, the question of Polish euro-membership became a central argument of the 2015 presidential and legislative campaigns.<sup>26</sup>

**According to you, how could we strengthen the idea of belonging to a common European public sphere among your national citizens?**

The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Poland's accession to the EU gave a little boost to the positive feelings about the EU. In 2014, 41% of Poles declared that they feel both Polish and European, a 5% increase in comparison to the previous year.<sup>27</sup> However, overall, the post-accession enthusiasm is becoming shaky and the EU's image has been seriously hurt by the Eurozone crisis. Thus, there is a need to give Polish support for the EU a renewed and more solid basis.

*Bridging the gap between support and understanding.* There is certainly a need for more

effort to educate the public about the EU, through different channels. First of all, mandatory education on the EU at school is important. The current curriculum would be made more attractive if it were more concentrated on the ongoing debates in the EU. To reach the older audience, there is a need to engage media, especially television and (often related) internet portals. Research conducted by the Notre Europe Jacques Delors Institute<sup>28</sup> indicates that Poles are quite enthusiastic about the idea of a TV programme/channel dedicated to EU affairs. Given the fact that most Poles would not actively seek this information, there is a need to talk much more about the EU as well as developments in other Member States, in order to create both interest and understanding. Programmes and news should focus not only on political issues, but also on opinion polls (existing statistics e.g. Eurobarometer might be used, as they are poorly known). Of course, similar initiatives might be brought simultaneously to the internet, to engage the younger part of the population, for instance by creating on-line polls and forums on portals presenting facts and news about the EU.

*Europeanising the debate.* The 2014 European Parliament elections failed to be truly europeanised in Poland. Most parties did not promote either their affiliation to the European political groups or their common European manifestos.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, different surveys showed that Poles feel that MEPs are somehow meant to promote European issues in Poland.<sup>30</sup> There would also be interest in hearing from MEPs from other countries. Moreover, Poles tend to trust European institutions a little more than national ones, believing that their European character should somehow lead to a higher standard of performance. The EU institutions could thus capitalise on this sentiment by better promoting their main successes and instances

where they defend public rights against political backlashes.

*Changing the narrative.* The narrative about the EU based on benefits certainly has an important place in assuring public support for integration. If asked about the benefits from European integration, Poles are most likely to talk about EU funds (and the investments they brought, especially in the infrastructure sector) and open borders (in terms of travel and labour market).<sup>31</sup> However, whereas the latter is under constant political threat, the former will certainly diminish after 2020. Politicians, EU institutions, media and NGOs must play their role in changing the way the EU is talked about to present it more as a shared good and common responsibility. It should focus more on the EU's role in the world, growing Polish influence and initiatives, as well as citizen engagement.

### **Which policies would you deem essential to conduct at the EU level in order to better legitimise the European project?**

As shown by the harsh debates on Poland's accession to the still shaky Eurozone as well as on the refugee quotas in 2015, continuing Polish support for the European project will depend more on the preservation and bettering of already existing policies than on the creation of new ones. Here are some Polish concerns that should find appropriate responses at the EU level.

*Preserving the freedom of movement.* Many Poles (aged over 30) guard rather traumatic memories of the hours-long queues at the borders with Western Europe before joining Schengen. Hence, giving up on the freedom of movement, would probably entail a huge decline of support for the EU. On the other hand, both Polish people and politicians will

pay strong attention to the efficiency of the EU's external borders in managing the refugee crisis.

*Cohesion Policy after 2020.* Tangible benefits of European integration, such as the EU cohesion policy, will remain a very important proof of EU solidarity, certainly as long as Poland has not reached Western European living standards. Policies perpetrating EU-wide economic convergence efforts, such as the Juncker investment plan, could thus greatly help. While Polish authorities understand the need for preparing the country's economy ahead of a large decrease in EU funding after 2020,<sup>32</sup> the EU should ensure the country avoids a detrimental economic shock.

*Fighting labour insecurity.* According to the EU Commission, the incidence of temporary contracts in Poland is the highest in the EU, while the transition rate from temporary to permanent employment remains low.<sup>33</sup> Combined with problems of mismatch between qualifications and labour market needs, the younger Polish generations are particularly exposed to this phenomenon as well as to continually high levels of unemployment (above 20% in 2014). Here the EU could aim to elaborate on higher common standards regarding the social guarantees offered by employment contracts. In addition, programmes such as the youth guarantee should be fully mobilised to fight youth unemployment.

*Energy security.* The EU seems set to expand in areas where Polish politicians will appreciate its greater role – for instance in building a security component of the energy union, which could constitute Poland and other Central European states' best guarantee in facing the risks related to a high-level of dependency on an almost unique energy provider – Russia.





## Endnotes

1. In the last decade, Poland almost doubled its GDP, including an increase of 20% since the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008, and tripled its exports of goods to EU partners. See for instance, Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Poland's 10 years in the European Union", 2014, <https://www.msz.gov.pl>.
2. For a more comprehensive understanding of these domestic debates, see for instance, Piotr Cichocki, "Polish Attitudes Towards the European Union", *Przegląd zachodni*, No. 3, 2011, <http://www.iz.poznan.pl>.
3. At the time of joining the EU, the 2004 Eurobarometer "Public opinion in the candidate countries", dedicated to Poland, showed almost 60% of the population expected to face greater economic difficulties.
4. Luca Barbone, Katarzyna Pietka-Kosinska, Irena Topinska, "The Impact of Remittances on Poland's Economy", CASE Network E-briefs, No. 12, September 2012, <http://www.case-research.eu>.
5. "Poland's 10 years in the European Union", *op.cit.*, p. 1.
6. Aleks Szczerbiak, "What does a Law and Justice election victory mean for Europe?", *The Polish Politics Blog*, 26 October 2015, <https://polishpoliticsblog.wordpress.com>.
7. See, for instance, the political programme of Janusz Korwin Mikke: <https://www.partiakorwin.pl>.
8. Workshop organised in the framework of the Building Bridges Project, Warsaw, 11 May 2015.
9. Piotr Cichocki, *op.cit.*, p. 274.
10. Workshop organised in the framework of the Building Bridges Project, Warsaw, 11 May 2015.
11. The Eurobarometer study from 2014 suggests that Poles feel quite confident about their level of knowledge on the EU – 68% declared that they knew how the EU functions in comparison with a 53% EU average.
12. CBOS, "Instytucje i obywatele w Unii Europejskiej", April 2013, <http://www.cbos.pl>.
13. Marek Dudkiewicz, Aleksander Fuksiewicz, Jacek Kucharzyk, Agniekska Łada, "Parlament Europejski. Społeczne zaufanie i (nie)wiedza", Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2013, <http://isp.org.pl>.
14. A matriculation exam is taken at the end of the high school. Its results serve also as entrance exams for University.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Turnout in all types of elections in Poland is remarkably low.
17. Marek Dudkiewicz, Aleksander Fuksiewicz, Jacek Kucharzyk, Agniekska Łada, "Parlament Europejski. Społeczne zaufanie i (nie)wiedza", Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2013, *op.cit.*, p. 47.
18. Standardowy Eurobarometr 82, "Opinia Publiczna w Unii Europejskiej Jesień 2014. Raport krajowy. Polska".
19. *Ibid.* 39% of Poles would cite it as a source of knowledge on the EU.
20. Elżbieta Kaca, Melchior Szczepanik, "Jak mówić o Unii? Wpływ komunikacji na zaangażowanie Polaków w sprawy europejskie", <https://www.pism.pl>.
21. Platforma Obywatelska belongs to the European People's Party (EPP) and Prawo i Sprawiedliwość to the European Conservatives and Reformists Group (ECR).
22. Agata Gostynska, Roderick Parkes, "Europe and Its Institutions: Towards a Renewed Polish Approach to the EU", *PISM Strategic File*, Vol. 38, No. 2, February 2014, <https://www.pism.pl>.
23. Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Poland's 10 years in the European Union", *op.cit.*, p. 2.
24. Mariusz Janicki, "Między buntem a obiadem", *Polityka*, July 2015, <http://www.polityka.pl>.
25. "Polacy przeciwko euro. 54 proc. uważa, że będzie czymś złym", *Tvn24bis*, June 2015, <http://tvn24bis.pl>.
26. Henry Foy, Zosia Wąsik, "Euro entry looms large in Polish election campaign", *Financial Times*, 20 July 2015.
27. CBOS, "10 lat członkostwa w Unii Europejskiej", Warszawa 2014, <http://www.cbos.pl>.
28. Virginie Timmerman, Daniel Debomy, "How would the citizens like to communicate with the European Union?", Notre Europe Jacques Delors Institute, December 2014, <http://www.delorsinstitute.eu>.
29. Contrary to the European Commission recommendation, the affiliation of Polish parties to the European Parliament was, for instance, not displayed on the ballot papers.
30. See both: Marek Dudkiewicz, Aleksander Fuksiewicz, Jacek Kucharzyk, Agniekska Łada, "Parlament Europejski. Społeczne zaufanie i (nie)wiedza", *op.cit.* and Virginie Timmerman, Daniel Debomy, "How would the citizens like to communicate with the European Union?", *op.cit.*
31. *Ibid.*
32. Grzegorz Schetyna, "Informacja rady ministrów o zadaniach polskiej polityki zagranicznej w latach 2014 – 2015", 6 November 2014, Warsaw, <http://www.msz.gov.pl>.
33. European Commission, "Recommendation for a Council Recommendation on the 2015 National Reform Programme of Poland and delivering a Council opinion on the 2015 Convergence Programme of Poland", COM(2015) 270 Final, Brussels, 13 May 2015.