Federalism and Nationalism in Polish Eastern Policy

Timothy Snyder

As the European Union admits more and more states of the former communist bloc, the eastern border of the European Union will overlap with a number of other very important divides: between more and less prosperous states, between western and eastern Christianity, between states with historically friendly ties with the United States and those without. Integration into the European Union will become far more than a metaphor, as its borders will function like those of a sovereign state.

Where will the European Union find its eastern policy, its *Ostpolitik*? During the Cold War, West Germany was the main source of eastern policy, for good reason. A divided Germany then marked the border of eastern and western Europe. Today, Germany has been reunified, and soon the European Union will enlarge to include Germany's eastern neighbors, most importantly Poland and Lithuania. The cold war lasted for two generations; the new divide between eastern and western Europe promises to last at least as long. Poland and Lithuania will soon become, and long remain, the eastern marches of the European Union. Their ideas and initiatives are likely to guide whatever eastern policy the European Union devises.

What exactly their inclinations will be, however, is far from clear. The eastern question persisted throughout modern Pol-

Timothy Snyder is Assistant Professor of History at Yale University. His most recent book is *The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999*.

ish and Lithuanian political history, from the founding moment of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569 to its collapse, from the recreation of Poland and Lithuania in 1918 to the Second World War, and through the Cold War to modern-day European integration. Eastern policy has been an uneasy mixture of two distinct concepts: the creation of common institutions with neighbors, which I shall call federalism, and the incorporation of territory, which I shall call nationalism. In general, nationalism proved to be simpler but more risky, while federalist solutions were more complicated yet also more durable.

The tension between nationalism and federalism was overcome perfectly only once, in a grand strategy formulated in the 1970s.

The tension between nationalism and federalism was overcome perfectly only once, in a grand strategy formulated in the 1970s that radically reinterpreted nationalist and federalist legacies. This strategy was based on the idea that Polish interests demanded the creation of Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian nation-states. However, the success of that eastern strategy has made it redundant since its application after 1989 (along with other reforms) helped assure Poland's (and Lithuania's) accession to the European Union.

Once this integration is complete, the entire eastern question will be posed anew, with different, and perhaps higher, stakes. As this historical realignment approaches, a review of traditional Polish eastern problems and solutions is very much in order.

The Union of Lublin. In the 1560s, the first important question about the structure of the Polish state arrived along with the golden age of Polish civilization and statehood: How should Poland deal with its eastern neighbors? Luckily, the middle nobility of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, who sought to secure for themselves the rights already enjoyed by their Polish peers, answered the question for them by supporting union. That union was established at Lublin in 1569; it was the final achievement of Polish King Zygmunt II, who was the last member of the Jagiellon dynasty. Upon his death, Polish and Lithuanian nobles asserted their right to elect his successor at the Great Confederation of Warsaw in 1573.

Although the words federalism and nationalism were not used at the time, the Lublin Union represents the first important attempt at deciding between whether to create common institutions with eastern neighbors or incorporate them into Poland. The Lublin Union is quite properly remembered as an example of the first tendency, for the Grand Duchy of Lithuania retained its own administration, treasury, code of law, and army. However, the Lublin Union also involved incorporation. The Polish king demanded, and received, the southern provinces of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, known as Bratslav, Kyiv, and Volhynia. While Lithuania preserved and developed its native institutions, Ukraine was wrenched from Lithuania and added to Poland. It

became part of the Polish Kingdom, with no special rights.

Therefore, there was a differentiation in policy between Lithuania and Ukraine from the very beginning. Instead of being a separate political entity, as Lithuania was and is, Ukraine became an undefined addendum, more a space than a country. Even so, the connection to Poland revived and rejuvenated Ukrainian civilization. The formation of a political union with Poland led to great sociocultural intermixing. Confronted with new Polish religious thought and the achievements of Latin and Polish scholarship, the Ukranian Orthodox clergy launched a brilliant Renaissance and Reformation, characterized by cosmopolitan education and religious toleration.[1]

However, every step Ukraine took towards the Polish model of European civilization deepened the gaps between Ukrainian magnates and the rest of society. Roman Catholicism and the Polish language unified the Ukrainian and Polish noblemen, but distanced Ukrainian noblemen from their own peasantry. Meanwhile, Ukrainian peasants were enserfed and impoverished as Polish and Jewish agents were brought in by the grain trade to organize the cultivation of Ukraine's fertile black earth.

The Cossacks, Ukraine's special caste of free warriors, posed a special dilemma. Although they helped Polish and Lithuanian knights defeat Sweden, Muscovy, and the Ottomans, the Polish-Lithuanian nobility took an ungenerous view of the Cossacks. Although many Cossack officers were themselves nobles, the rank and file were mainly of peasant origins. Since noble landowners wished to keep the peasants on the land, they tried to limit the numbers of legal or "registered" Cossacks. When the Cossacks were needed, higher numbers were allowed and pay was sent. In this way, the incorporation of Ukraine by Poland sharpened the incipient conflict between two native Ukrainian groups: the richest local boyars, who used Polish practices to become wealthy landowners, and the Cossacks, who grew in size thanks to peasant suffering but were never integrated into the political system. This tension escalated into a full-scale Ukrainian civil war in 1648 after the provocation of Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi.

After Khmel'nyts'kyi allied with Muscovy in 1654, his Cossacks helped Muscovy to make war on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The results were disastrous: nearly a third of the Commonwealth's inhabitants died in the war and associated calamities; official religious toleration was undermined by a new suspicion of non-Catholics; and the Commonwealth itself began a fatal economic and political decline. This first attempt at federalism had failed miserably. The internal Ukrainian tensions generated by the political union were too great to sustain. From the experience of early modern Poland-Lithuania, it seems that federations are inherently harder to manage than policies of incorporation. This is all the more true in times of war, when the various parties concerned are more likely to be absorbed by prospects of immediate gain and loss, and less inclined to negotiate complicated compromises. The complexity of federal solutions places them at an inherent disadvantage to nationalist ones.

Pilsudski and Dmowski. Jozef Pilsudski and Roman Dmowski, the two most important Polish politicians of the early twentieth century, articulated

mutually exclusive ideas of Poland. Pilsudski was a federalist from the east, a socialist of noble origin who imagined Poland reborn in a federation with Lithuania. His Poland would be bound together by ancient traditions, the common sense of the Polish-speaking elite of whatever ethnic origin, and the generosity and effectiveness of a modern state. Dmowski, a stonecutter's son from central Poland, had an entirely different vision. He imagined a new Poland created from a modern Polish society. This society was built from the Polish-speaking peasantry, and was meant to match Germans and surpass Jews. Traditions and elites were important only insofar as they helped the masses to understand their common nationhood. The east was to be incorporated so long as its population could be absorbed into Polish culture.[2]

Polish eastern policy began anew in 1919 when Pilsudski marched his armies east to claim the ancient territories of Lithuania. From Pilsudski's perspective, the Polish-Bolshevik War that followed was fought to create a new Polish-Lithuanian federation. In the end, however, his purposes were thwarted not by the Bolsheviks, whom he defeated, but by the Polish nationalists who negotiated the peace. Pilsudski was commander in chief of the army, but Dmowski's National Democrats dominated the national assembly and the peace delegation. They handed back eastern lands under Polish control to the Bolsheviks, including all of what Pilsudski imagined as the Belarusian canton of the federation. Meanwhile, Lithuanian leaders made clear that they had no interest in a federation. Pilsudski still controlled Vilnius and its surroundings, which were to be the Central Lithuanian canton of the federation. Yet without Belarus and ethnic Lithuania, the whole idea of a federation collapsed, and Vilnius was simply incorporated into Poland.

In attempting to build his federation, Pilsudski was unable to overcome his lack of local allies. Popular support would have helped, but the peasants and Jews of traditional Lithuania saw no special reason why they should be governed from Warsaw. With time he might have made a better case, but time is precisely what war denied him. Most of all, he lacked the support of Poles at home, many of whom recognized that every eastern enlargement moved Poland to the political left, disturbing the delicate balance between right and left. The assassination of Poland's federalist President, Gabriel Narutowicz, by a right-winger punctuated the end of the federal ideas, and Pilsudski retired from politics—for a time.

Yet Pilsudski had made a major change to the nationalist canon. Ukraine, previously marginal, became central. After securing control of the West Ukrainian Republic provinces of L'viv and Galicia, Pilsudski allied himself in 1920 with the Kyiv state of Symon Petliura. Poles and Ukrainians fought the Bolsheviks as allies until the Treaty of Riga, but this alliance was short-lived. With the Treaty of Riga, Poland agreed to recognize Soviet Ukraine and promptly interned its former Ukrainian allies. Pilsudski's hope to create a Ukrainian buffer state went unfulfilled; there was little he could do besides apologize to his Ukrainian comrades in arms. Nevertheless, the precedent for a military alliance with Ukraine had been set.

In 1926, when Pilsudski returned to power by military coup, he remembered his Ukrainian allies, and sent his friend and fellow federalist Henryk J zewski to govern the province of Volhynia, which was by far the most Ukrainian region in

Poland. J zewski, a veteran of the 1920 campaign who was a native of Kyiv and spoke Ukrainian, had grand plans for the revival of Ukraine within Poland. He returned Ukrainian education to the classroom, brought the Ukrainian language to the liturgy of the Orthodox Church, and ensured that loyal Ukrainian politicians were elected to parliament. Recalling his experiences in the Polish-Bolshevik War, J zewski promised Ukrainians independence in the future while working for their loyalty within Poland.[3]

Like Pilsudski's Lithuanian federation, J zewski's Volhynian experiment was doomed by a silent alliance of two nationalisms. Ukrainian nationalists easily penetrated the non-governmental organizations J zewski sponsored, and exploited the relative freedom of Volhynia. They were not satisfied by J zewski's limited reforms, and promised peasants more freedom and more land. Once again, attempts at federalism were easily undermined by these issues. If Volhynia was to enjoy land reform, why import thousands of Polish officers as colonists? If Ukrainian was to be taught in schools, why not create entirely Ukrainian schools? Meanwhile, Polish nationalists were hostile to the Volhynian experiment from the very beginning. After Pilsudski's death, J zewski lost control over policy in Volhynia, and his experiment came to an end in 1938.

1973: Giedroyc and Mieroszewski. Today, Volhynia is best remembered by Poles as the site of horrific ethnic cleansing by the Ukrainians. The Volhynian cleansing, which incited bloody Polish responses, was only one of many similarly terrible events brought on by the brutality of Nazi and Soviet occupations in Poland's east. Soviet deportation of old eastern Polish elites from 1939-1941 and Nazi racial policies from 1941-1944 both undermined any remnants of federalist traditions. After the Ukrainian-Polish civil war began in 1943, the idea of federal relations between Ukraine and Poland seemed absurd. Stalin recognized the primacy of ethnic nationalism when he chose to separate Poles from Ukrainians in 1944; meanwhile Polish communists used the achievement of ethnic homogeneity in Poland to gain popular support. It seemed federalism had disappeared from view, perhaps forever. Communist Poland, in any event, had no eastern policy as such, and the history of Polish power in the east became taboo. London Poles agreed with Stalin that the idea of a federation between Poland and its eastern neighbors was dead; they believed that Vilnius and L'viv were Polish cities that should be restored to Poland.[4]

As early as 1947, a lonely voice proposed something totally different. Jerzy Giedroyc, born in Minsk, was a federalist and an admirer of Pilsudski. Between the wars he understood national questions in terms of the survival of the Polish state, rather than the position of the Polish nation. Even during World War II, he maintained contacts with Ukrainian colleagues, and planned a forum for postwar discussion.[5] Since Pilsudski had died in 1935 and J zewski was imprisoned in communist Poland (for his prewar policies, among other things), Giedroyc was left as the leading voice of the old federalist position. In 1947, his monthly *Kultura* endorsed the notion that Poland's new eastern borders were acceptable, and that L'viv and Vilnius could be left with Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Lithuania. At the time, this view was scandalous and

largely ignored, and Giedroyc left it to his friend Juliusz Mieroszewski to explain the strategic logic.

In 1973, Mieroszewski began outlining an eastern policy for a future, independent Poland. In Mieroszewski's view, Russian and Polish nationalism would be the primary dangers to such a state. Imperialists in both Warsaw and Moscow would be tempted by the lands between them—Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine—and would likely make a deal at their expense. Mieroszewski thought that such a deal would poison Polish domestic politics, and ultimately doom the Polish state. To prevent this chain of events, he argued that a future Polish state should recognize its eastern frontier with Lithuania, Belarus, and Ukraine. Setting aside historic grievances, Polish statesmen should accept that an aggressive eastern policy was not in the interests of Poland. Mieroszewski argued that the Polish opposition should announce in advance that it accepted these borders. Moreover, the Polish opposition should help and encourage Lithuanian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian independence movements. This meant accepting that Ukrainian, Belarusian, and Lithuanian national history and sentiments were equal to those among the Polish—a revolutionary concept.[6]

In intellectual terms, this grand strategy was entirely new. It was neither federalist nor nationalist, though it drew from both traditions. Like federalism, it accepted the political reality of the countries between Poland and Russia. Like nationalism, it accepted that the only meaningful form of political existence was the independent nation-state. Its goal was neither a federation in which Poland would be the stronger partner, nor an incorporation of eastern borderlands, leaving the rest to Russia. Its goal was to create a band of durable nation-states between Poland and Russia, whose main function from the Polish point of view was to resolve by their very existence all eastern questions and therefore prevent the Polish state from overreaching and falling into territorial traps set by Moscow.

The European Union, like the Lublin Union, is rather an elite project, and its weaknesses reside in its lack of popular support.

Although the *Kultura* eastern program was greeted at first with silence and skepticism, Mieroszewski's path-breaking 1973 article was widely disseminated over the next twenty years, became accepted by the Polish counter-elite created by the Solidarity movement, and was implemented after the 1989 revolutions. In the early years of Polish independence, the eastern program worked poorly when applied to states that did not resemble nation-states (Russia and Belarus) and well with those that did (Lithuania and Ukraine). This eastern program allowed Poland to overcome the challenges of a restive and revanchist Polish minority around Vilnius and of a historically-minded Lithuanian government. In retrospect, it mattered most in relations with Ukraine.

Just as *Kultura* had prescribed, informal relations between the Polish and Ukrain-

ian oppositions became formal relations between an independent Poland and still-Soviet Ukraine. Independent Poland and Soviet Ukraine had resolved all their outstanding national and border questions in quasi-formal agreements well before the end of the Soviet Union. The *rapprochement* between Warsaw and Kyiv achieved before December 1991 was a major reason why the Soviet Union's disintegration was peaceful. By removing the Polish question from Ukrainian politics before it was even raised, Foreign Minister Krzysztof Skubiszewski and Polish diplomats fostered cooperation between west and east Ukrainians, and between communist reformers and opposition intellectuals. The Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation moved from legal recognition to political cooperation to historical reconciliation over the course of the 1990s.[7]

Giedroyc and Mieroszewski created a synthesis of federalism and nationalism that fit the international politics of the postwar and post-Cold War world. The intellectual achievement of 1973 had become a complete political success by 1994: the Soviet Union had been removed from the map, and Poland had arranged its relations with all of its new eastern neighbors. The central place of Ukraine was guaranteed by the newly-formed Polish-Ukranian axis, which may very well be considered the great success of Skubiszewski's eastern policy. The new policy, a blend of nationalism and federalism, had finally resolved the eastern question, at least for the time being.

European Union: National or Federalist? From the mid-1990s, Skubiszewski and his successors were greatly helped by the prospect of European Union enlargement. After the original *Kultura* program was fulfilled, Skubiszewski proposed a policy of European standards, in which Poland and its neighbors would agree to certain European norms of minority rights in the common hope of European integration. Later Polish governments used the country's relatively advanced position in the European queue to channel European leverage against eastern neighbors interested in integration. When Poland accedes to the European Union in about two years, these types of strategies will no longer be possible, and those who plan Polish eastern policy will find themselves in an unprecedented position. What can we predict about a Europe in which Poland and Lithuania pool sovereignty with western neighbors in 2004? Do traditions of federalism and nationalism offer any guidance?

On the surface, it might appear that joining the European Union implies a continuation of federalism. Yet the European Union, like the Lublin Union, is in fact ambiguous on this score. To put the matter bluntly, the European Union, like the Lublin Union, will embrace Poland and Lithuania but in the main exclude the East Slavs. The European Union, like the Lublin Union, is rather an elite project, and its weaknesses reside in its lack of popular support. In many policy essentials, moreover, the Polish choice for Europe is more nationalist than federalist. To join the EU, in at least one important sense, is like integrating with a nation-state.[8]

The eastern policy of the 1990s, while its goal was the preservation of Polish statehood, at least required serious engagement with neighbors to the east. In particular, Poland in the 1990s fostered human contact with its neighbors,

signing a visa-free agreement with Ukraine despite EU opposition. When Poland joins the EU, it also joins its border agreements. Poland's eastern border becomes the eastern border of the EU, and Poland's eastern neighbors become the eastern neighbors of the EU. Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian citizens will find themselves confronted with the hard external border of the EU, now demarcated along the Bug rather than the Oder. The scale of this change, to come perhaps in 2004, is comparable to that of 1918, 1945, or 1989. What should the response be? The intellectual legacies of nationalism and federalism remain available for the interpretation, as they have since 1569. The traditions of the Lublin Union remain salient in a new world of European Union. They await a new generation of interpreters, diplomats, and citizens who relish a challenge.

NOTES

1 A notable recent publication is Nataliia Iakovenko, *Paraleln'yi Svit* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2002).

2 Very perceptive was Ksawery Pruszynski, *Niezadowoleni i entuzjasci* (Warsaw: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1990 [1939]), 637-644.

3 Consult Wlodzimierz Medrzecki, *Wojewodztwo wolynskie*, (Wroclaw: Ossolineum, 1988); Jan Kesik, *Zaufany komendanta* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego, 1995).

4 The causes, course and consequences of ethnic cleansing are treated in Timothy Snyder, The Reconstruction of Nations: Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, Belarus, 1569-1999 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 154-216.

5 Jerzy Giedroyc with Kryzsztof Pomian, Autobiografia na cztery rece (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1996).

6 Consult Juliusz Mieroszewski, "Polska 'Ostpolitik'," and "Rosyjski 'Kompleks Polski' i ULB," Materialy do refleksji i zadumy (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1976), 110-122, 175-186.

7 For an extended treatment of post-1989 eastern policy, see Snyder, Reconstruction of Nations, 232-276.

8 Peter Andreas and Timothy Snyder, eds., The Wall Around the West (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).