

POLAND'S ROLE IN THE EAST AFTER NATO ENLARGEMENT: MENDING DIFFERENCES WITH RUSSIA¹

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If in the transition years 1989-90, it was presumptuous to imagine Poland as the conduit of reform for the former Soviet region, the occasion is very real today. It became abundantly clear in the course of NATO enlargement debate that Poland was the anchor of Western security strategy for Central Europe, a regional leader. In making this claim, I do not mean to diminish the strategic importance of Hungary, especially for the developments in the Balkans, or the accomplishments of the Czech Republic. I would argue that Poland evolved into this role more because of its geopolitical location than history, albeit the colorful tradition of dissention that culminated in Solidarity's short-lived triumph in 1980 and victory in 1989 inspired the West.

Poland was, as Oleg Kalugin acknowledged, the weakest link in the communist chain, and Moscow was studiously aware of it. If the three Ws: Walesa, Wojtyla and Wajda, by which Poland has been popularized in the West, have passed from the political scene, they continue to inspire. Poland's tiger status among the transition economies gives some hope that, not only Central Europe, but the entire former Soviet region, including the troubled Russia and even the regressive Belarus, can eventually join the community of democratic societies based on the rule of law.

Is Poland ready to seize the opportunity to facilitate building a civil society in Russia? Poles often say they know the Russians better than others do, but is this in fact the case? What should be Poland's "Russia strategy?"

The lesson to be drawn from the transition period, underscored by the NATO enlargement debate, is that moral or historical reflections, while a factor and a useful means to rouse the public around an issue, yield to practical considerations and long-term strategic needs which have their own historical logic. In the historical tug-of-war region between Poland and Russia of the Borderland [the so-called "Kresy"] between the East and the West, much can be done, as Poland has already recognized in its policy towards the Baltics and Ukraine. Ambassador Dan Fried, and some American policymakers, have also been quite aware of this unique cultural opportunity.

Poland should be careful not to play up its past. In his interview with the daily *Rzeczpospolita*, foreign minister Bronislaw Geremek, attempting to play down historical ambitions, perhaps overstated Poland's role as a "regional power" with a special insight into the East. Historical reflections can also lead to misunderstandings, as the debates with Lithuanians over the rights to the Vilnius region in the twenties and Ukrainians over ethnic cleansing campaigns in the aftermath of World War II have demonstrated. However, the new NATO

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member's history as a conduit for Western ideas in the region, not always appreciated in Washington, is an enormous advantage by comparison with Germany of the Cold War era.

The cultural divide between the East and the West is an important component that impinges on political decisions in the region. Belarus, steeped in retro-ideology of Lukashenkanism, has regressed to former Soviet "glory" days but even "batska" Lukashenka succumbs to the power of the Borderland myth. Russian leaders, like the presidential hopeful Aleksandr Lebed, are also seduced by it, as if the old line had to be redrawn to protect the East from the West, and these days, to protect it from itself. Like many Russians, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, general Lebed would keep Belarus and Ukraine in the East. The ethnization of politics, evident in the so-called "Slavic nucleus," are an obstacle to the development of the region (Zviglyanovich).

For all the uncertainty about itself, mired in nostalgia for its power status and resentment towards the West, it has to be recognized that Russia is the key component of the post-Soviet maze even without Belarus or Ukraine. Of course, Ukraine and Poland present an intriguing counterbalance, but the point is to think beyond the Cold War chessboard and apply the Josef Pilsudski checkmate. What is to be done about Russia?

Dr. Brzezinski's idea of transforming Ukraine into a Central European state has much strategic merit. Forging greater independence of Ukraine by providing outlets for its exports and options for its energy sources should be pursued perhaps even more zealously than has been to date. Gradual integration of Ukraine into the transatlantic structures, particularly NATO, provides a counterbalance that can no doubt check Russia's imperial ambitions. While it is true, as Dr. Brzezinski underscores, that NATO enlargement has been largely a problem for the elites, overplaying the Ukraine card could be perceived in Moscow as a threat. Russia, purged of its imperial ambitions, should be more open to democratic reforms, as Robert Hutchings has observed. However, if the inclusive policy that pandered to Russian ambitions as a world power has not worked, dramatic demonstrations of Moscow's powerlessness are likely to alienate and prolong the much needed cure.

Western opinion seems to have coalesced after the ruble's tailspin in 1998 to a quarter of its value and subsequent leap in inflation. As some of the more distinguished Russia watchers concluded at the June 9-10, 1999 Jamestown Foundation Conference "Russia: What Went Wrong? Which Way Now?," Russian transition has been an abysmal failure, and the future of the region increasingly uncertain. According to projected figures for the year 2000, at just \$24 billion, Russia's annual budget is about half the budget of Texas with about 42% projected just to service its debt. Some estimates for processing debt run as high as 70-80% (*Monitor* 15, 1999).

If at the Jamestown Foundation Conference, David Satter contended that "the whole notion of a free economy was deformed," virtually all serious Russia watchers fault Yeltsin and the ruling elites, as well as the shortcomings of the so-called "Washington consensus" promoting stabilization, liberalization and privatization. The removal of Evgeny Primakov has demonstrated that, while Yeltsin may be personally compromised and unpopular, the superpresidency remains essentially intact, with the prime minister largely a puppet and the Duma virtually impotent. For all its internal disputes, the power structure is firmly in place.

The key question asked was "Why did shock therapy work in Poland and not in Russia?" Grzegorz Kolodko's explanation stressing long-range institutional changes and microeconomic regimen seemed reasonable enough; but his proposal that credits shifts in economic policy before "shock therapy" initiated by Leszek Balcerowicz in the first Solidarity government in 1989 is largely revisionist. Kolodko's argument runs counter to the consensus of historical retrospectives on the Round Table discussions, including PIASA's, in which all the former US ambassadors to Poland participated. Western carrot and stick policy in tandem with the demands of the

opposition forced the liberalization, not the communist regime “liberals” in the Jaruzelski government. The grassroots pressed and the bankrupt power-structure yielded in 1989.

To be sure conditions for transition varied from country to country and required fine tuning and heterogeneous methods. Poland’s agriculture was in private hands. On the whole, the countries of Central Europe were more ripe for the transition than the former Soviet republics, but significant exceptions existed. As Peter Rutland astutely noted, some choices, like voucher privatization applied in the Czech Republic and Russia, lent themselves to corruption but political expediency often won out over economic sense. While there may be some truth in the argument that “shock therapy” failed to achieve economic stability in countries like Ukraine or Russia for lack of cultural traditions, the main flaw seems to me to have been the introduction of changes “from above” without proper restraining mechanisms “from below.”

Dr. Brzezinski, the keynote speaker at the Jamestown Foundation Conference, underscored the seminal role of the opposition, the Solidarity movement and the Roman Catholic Church. In most of the former Soviet republics, Belarus for example, there was no significant grassroots movements restraining power. Zenon Paznyak’s Belarusin Popular Front never enjoyed more than 15% of the popular support and its anti-Russian rhetoric was an obstacle in a country in which most public business was conducted in Russian. Reforms in Russia and in the former Soviet region were initiated from above with many self-conscious attempts by the ruling elites to stir *perestroika* to their own advantage. The ruling nomenklatura_ stood to benefit, not lose, from Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms and, broadly speaking, did not resist them. One could argue that it created a new system that would transform its control over the means of production into ownership.

Jan Nowak’s insistence on greater openness to Western ideas in Poland can hardly be disputed even if Nowak exaggerates the role of academic exchanges in which both Leszek Balcerowicz and Grzegorz Kolodko, participated as Fulbright scholars. The exchanges were one of many factors, including the spread of new technology and ideas, key being the counterculture with traditions that spawned the opposition movement. Social development cannot simply be attributed to the elites but has to be viewed in the framework of the culture of change. While leadership matters, authority figures without grassroots support, be it organizational or ideological, are not able to lead effectively for long. Russian experience since *perestroika* amply demonstrates that history is driven by circumstances unforeseen by the decision makers.

In contrast, Richard Pipes and Marshall Goldman, in my opinion, give too much credence to history and distinctive traits of Russian character that seems to clash with the broad assessment by the political analysts of the current situation: the lack of strong identity and coherent describable character in the region. Is Russian identity distinguishable from Russian imperial ambitions? Polls suggest a growing danger of Lukashenkanism: favoring ethnic self-identification and expressing nostalgia for the Brezhnev years—with both Stalinist and Czarist Russia faring better than Yeltsin’s. According to Aleksandr Buzgalin, 71% distrust the police and 64.1% distrust the legal system. While the time might be auspicious for a strong law and order candidate, most Russians have become disillusioned with their leaders and increasingly left out of the political process.

Crisis of identity is a given after a massive capitulation of an all-consuming ideology and territorial disintegration of an empire. Perhaps the question to ask is whether a discernable Russian post-Soviet identity and future have manifested themselves historically? Peter Reddaway quoted poll figures indicating that roughly half of the Russian population preferred to think of itself as Eurasian [as opposed to European], but the tag is of recent vintage, as Professor Pipes noted. If it were possible to invent a new identity for the Russians, let it be Borderland European,

which is to say a European with understandable multi-polar interests [Central Asia, the Pacific rim].

It seems to me counterproductive to pander to patterns of historical character in a society that has applied reason to history as a means for rationalizing its totalitarian condition. Lack of strong ethnic or national identification, which I tagged as the local [*tutejszy*] syndrome in discussing the Borderland, might be a more constructive way of understanding the roots identity conflicts in still largely localized, agrarian societies like Belarus, provincial Ukraine or Russia. The paternalism of the communist distribution system and highly centralized power only reinforced this “local” syndrome. Russia has traditionally had a strong sense of identity which has become amorphous and regionalized with the disintegration of its empire. The erosion of state structures and feudalization of social relations in the region is likely to cause further erosion, perhaps giving rise to retro-ideologies and leaders—some variant of Lukashenka—whose sense of independence is largely subsidized.

While the village with global ambitions mentality rooted in historical messianism and a profound sense of powerlessness are deep-seated in the Russian psyche, the West is resented because it threw its support behind a clique of corrupt oligarchs in power who squandered the nation’s wealth. One could argue that the more Russia becomes dependent on Western aid, the more it resents the West. The feelings of resentment surfaced in the reaction to the Kosovo bombing as a form of displaced empathy, a compression of conflicting, often irrational impulses. It was a vehicle for Russians to express their feeling that they have been had: with the West not holding to its promises, with the West victimizing the Serbs, or people like us, the Russians. Milosevic, who in many ways resembles Lukashenka and some of the Russian ideologues, made it a war about dignity not about winning.

What is the prognosis for the future? Dr. Brzezinski compared Russia to the worst slum run by local “crews.” Watts on the eve of the riots, the size of Russia with 30,000 nukes, is hard to grasp in one swoop even by a seer: a black hole that can gobble up everything, not just the IMF billions! Even an analysis of the state of the Russian military by an organization like the Congressional Research Service warns of “war-lordism.” Marek Karp of the Institute Eastern Studies [*Osrodek Badan Wschodnich*] in Warsaw generally agrees with this grim assessment but believes the center will hold because a crash might be too costly to the oligarchs who pull the stings. Mikhail Matysin has tried to put the best face on the crisis pointing to a visible rise in regional self-sufficiency likely to press for reforms. It is possible that the oligarchs will reach a compromise before the presidential elections but further erosion of the state and the decline of central power seem a foregone conclusion.

Political instability in Russia is likely to continue after Yeltsin. In six and a half years of the Yeltsin presidency, Russia has seen five prime ministers and seven different governments, three under Viktor Chernomyrdin. With each new government, it should come as no surprise that Russia lacks a consistent policy and that its government, for all the incredible corruption, has even the pretense of legitimacy. The juggling for position, however, has not short-circuited the basic power grid. Hence, it may not matter in the long run whether Sergei Stepashin, or “the conductor” Nikolai Aksenko is groomed by “the family” to be the next in line, or whether the Kremlin will neutralize Yuri Luzhkov, or whether Yeltsin’s replacement will be Grigory Yavlinsky or Aleksandr Lebed or Gennady Slezyev.

Russia, Piontkovsky cautions, did not simply undergo massive privatization by the nomenklatura whereby the former party functionaries became the owners of the businesses they ran with systemic market changes in place. Privatization by the Russian nomenklatura was without risk and continues to be subsidized by the state budget and the taxpayer. If Piontkovsky’s assessment is correct, one should be very cautious with providing aid to Russia although the

massive costs might outweigh the risks. A multibillion-dollar bailout by the IMF is likely to avoid a Russian default. Jane Perlez reported in June 20, 1999 issue of the *New York Times* that about \$5.5 billion of the debt has already been deferred until the end of 2000 even though no long-term decision has as yet been made on Russia's \$155 billion debt.

Aid should be parceled out and carefully targeted at specific well-defined, local projects, not used to prop up the corrupt apparatus of the ruling oligarchy. That option is increasingly more available. If Armenia, Georgia, or Ukraine are an example, the suprapresidential model will face a growing challenge and may have to be reformed even in Russia as the crisis deepens. This challenge may lead to regionalization of political, financial and even military structures and transform Russia into a confederation, as the Center for Eastern Studies March 1999 report proposes. While sufficient openness and relatively independent social groupings did not exist in 1991, they are beginning to now.

The principal American policy interest should be to control the spread of nuclear weapons and leakage of sensitive technology to unfriendly states. As Professor Rutland observed, "lending to Russia would have happened no matter what." Critical objectives were achieved at a price but money was also made. Did American policy makers unwittingly ascribe American values and features and ended up victims of their own rhetoric? Did the experts apply universal recipes that would work everywhere without taking into account the specific cultural traits? Whether or not the aid was misdirected or given to those who could deliver the goods depends on determination of the principal concerns in the region.

Further aid assumes that Russia can muddle through the rough times. The Jamestown Foundation Conference participants did not rule out further territorial fragmentation or even a massive conflict, after all the country flirted with civil war twice in this decade. For all the IMF billions, poured into Russia, the participants felt that creating a climate auspicious for development was up to the Russians themselves. They did not think that the West alone, and especially the United States, has much leverage to stir the region to democratization and market values, or to have significant impact on helping Russia to put its house in order.

Finally, it is my contention that Russia, indeed the entire former Soviet region, is the Borderland of the West, and that the democratization of Russia and development of its economy will require some form of, albeit gradual, Europeanization. If this is the case, Poland, and, to a lesser degree the Baltic states, are an essential component in this transition process to the extent that geopolitics is still relevant in the technological age.

What might be Poland's role as the regional leader?

1. As the Center for Eastern Studies March 1999 report proposes, Poland should avoid becoming the West's "border watch tower." It should be open to a historical reconciliation with Russia on the model of its reconciliation with Germany. Part of the problem is that Russia has not taken the expected step to take account of its past. Perhaps even more than a reexamination of its conscience, Russia needs a comprehensive flushing out of its historical identity. Historical discussions and reconciliations counter the nostalgia prevalent in the post-Soviet region. They cost little and should be an important instrument of policy. Normalization of the region is in the interest of the West and a historical reconciliation could help diminish potential for conflict.

It is in the long term interest of Russia to be a strategic partner of EU and NATO, which is why I am not persuaded by the view that Russia and Poland have conflicting interests. Even in sensitive areas, such as the underdevelopment of Belarus, which must be a significant drain scarce Russian resources, there is room for constructive dialogue. Lukashenka's staying power is not in his maverick charisma, as some have suggested. Full integration of Belarus with Russia would simply come at a price Russia can ill-afford. A host of common regional interests could be

resolved between Poland and Russia with practical orientation and vision. The economic deterioration in the Kaliningrad enclave affects regional stability and development.

Importantly, a historical reconciliation with Russia diffuses potential tensions over developments in the Ukraine. More importantly, Russia needs to be reassured, especially after the conflict in Kosovo, that NATO is not its adversary. It needs to be shown that the enlargement of the alliance could benefit even Russia, that it has already brought unprecedented stability to the region to permit Poland and Russia to normalize their relationship by gradually coming to terms with their past.

In the course of this historical reconciliation, it is important to redefine the meaning of the Borderland myth, not as an ideological construct but as a workable model for a multi-polar society. Deconstructing cultural ideologies is an essential first step of policy, in this case to breach the border of Russian imagination by a gradual expansion of Western structures into the former Soviet region, including as a long-term goal NATO.

2. Poland should become even more Russia-conscious than it already is, by building structures, such as the proposed non-governmental Eastern Policy Forum, which could draw on scholars from various institutes and include scholars from the Baltics, Ukraine and even Russia. Even under the best circumstances, Poland has only limited economic capabilities to affect the course of the development in the former Soviet region but may be significantly affected by its destabilization. The Polish-American Foundation to be established from the proceeds to the Enterprise Fund can certainly help in the effort to promote development in the East but the task is enormous and requires significant infusion of Western capital if this grand partnership is to succeed.

For its part, as the point of the West in the region, Poland has not done enough to promote its “frontline” status as a conduit of ideas and a model of a successful transition. It needs to undertake forceful initiatives looking forward to a post-Yeltsin Russia. While the current Russian elite’s continued control over the levers of economic and political power is uncertain, Western policy cannot be held hostage to “family squabbles,” or to neutralizing this or that individual.

The West should take a long-term view of its relations with the region. Warsaw’s “triangular” [Warsaw, Berlin, Paris] European policy axis ought to include a significant Russia component. As the Center for Eastern Studies March 1999 report indicates European Union policy towards the region has not been effectively coordinated with Warsaw. EU’s pressures on its future member to tighten its eastern border restrictions to movement and limit its regional enterprise zones were shortsighted. Western food subsidies to Russia have negatively affected the already troubled Polish agriculture.

Warsaw and Washington also should establish better channels of communication for a more constructive cooperation to foster grassroots democratic institutions and market values in the East, which should be thought of not as Eurasia but as Borderland Europe. While the region is slowly becoming more economically heterogeneous and less dependent on Moscow, the future of Russia as a modern state is with the West. The West should commit itself to a partnership to reclaim the region mired in chaos and capitulation of ideology for civil society.

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