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Poland and Russia, Heading in the Same Direction

*(...) we are sailing in the same direction,
however, in different boats and at different speeds*

President Aleksander Kwaśniewski

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Having done away with state-socialism, Poland is completing the process of re-integration into the world system. The Russians, or the citizens of the Russian Federation (RF) are undergoing an even more profound process of change for not only are they shedding the legacy of Communism, but are also relinquishing their aspirations to build an alternative world-system, and their position as citizens of one of the world's two superpowers. And an easy exercise it is not. After all, it is not true that the USSR had no systemic success to its credit; the creation of a New Man, *Sovyetskiyi tshelovyek*, *Homo sovieticus*, was quite advanced, and with it came the blueprint for new societal relations. The type of political culture that ensued hampers the construction of a new economic and political system in the RF, and such a system is the key pre-requisite for complete re-integration of the RF with the world system and a precondition for optimising the country's position therein. Political democracy, the rule of law, a free-market economy, civil society, cooperative relations with neighbouring states must constitute the foundations of a future for our mighty neighbour. Poles are looking at the Russian social-system-building exercise with hope. Who would not like to have a neighbour at ease with itself, with similar tastes and civilised

manners, especially in the light of centuries of suffering from the effects of neighbourly insatiable stance?

Russia will make it. For our part, we are facing a long period of coming to terms with the conditions for re-integration, a period spanning our lifetime and that of generations to come. So it is not enough to wait for Russia to transform itself; Russia needs to be helped, in both her and our interest. This has been a subject of a recent debate at the Institute on the occasion of the Polish-Russian Conference 2001.

As usual, business relations are not insignificant. Yet, year after year, Poland's trading account with the Russian Federation shows a huge deficit. How long can this last? Does this prevent fostering good relations? Could Russian credit for importers of Polish goods and services help? Is the current financial infrastructure adequate? Also necessary is the growth of Polish and Russian FDIs in both countries. However it is not just the type and quality of foreign investors' potential output in Poland that matters for us.

Another way to improve mutual understanding is through literature, music, theatre and film. Nonetheless, foreign language skills are irreplaceable. Knowledge of Russian among younger Poles is poor, with Polish being even less familiar to Russians; however there is growing interest in the Russian language in Poland.

Trade, or business relations in general, cultural presence or knowledge of both languages will not by themselves bring home the significance of Russia for Poland and vice versa. Other factors are in play, too.

Firstly, for other countries, Russia's Polish policy is one of the criteria used to assess the rate of Russia's de-imperialisation and in evaluating Russians' attitudes towards their neighbours, NATO and EU members. The protestations against Poland's aspirations to NATO membership have shown that Poland's independence is still difficult for Russians to come to terms with. It is worth drawing attention here to Germany's attitude in that respect, a country that links its policy towards Poland with notions of democracy and being pro-European and which treats its relationship with Poland as an important part of its systemic orientation and pro-European stance.

With the era of aggression, hostility and domination over Poland now gone, Russia finally needs to come to terms with the fact that Poland has definitely overcome the entanglement of the Russian

domination and Polish dependency, once and for all. Certain Russian analysts (and, possibly, some politicians too) have not progressed from an uncomprehending, mythical view of the West, NATO and the EU. They should abandon the Soviet legacy of centralism and superpower status, which leads to treating the mythical "West", NATO and the EU as monoliths with some sort of imposed "top-down management". They should not see Central European countries as pawns in the hands of "Washington" or "Brussels". The sooner they understand the difference between the Warsaw Pact and NATO, or between the EEC and Comecon for that matter, the better they will do at analysing their country's situation and advising their governments on managing relations with the Russian Federation's neighbours.

Secondly, Poland's policy towards Russia is a test of Poland's maturity as an ally and partner in NATO and in the EU.

We Poles must abandon unfounded notions of our superiority over Russians as "Europeans". This prejudice ties in with the stereotypes of Poles, Russians and Europeans, i.e., the hasty generalisations being drawn from insufficient information. (The Institute's research in progress includes the State Scientific Research Committee-sponsored surveys of mutual prejudices among Poles and Russians.) Whoever asks whether exposing a European to long spells of Siberian temperatures affects his or her mind set, begs the question: what are the long-term effects of being stuck in the muddy backwaters of ethnocentrism of a small town in Poland?

Likewise, we should take more notice of Poland acting as a catalyst in bringing Russia closer to Europe and the entire trans-Atlantic world, and vice versa. This is not about being a political intermediary, or building a bridge that our Eastern and Western neighbours could traverse on their way to visit one another. Rather, the opportunity is that Poland's re-integration with the West allows our partners and allies in the EU and NATO to have a clearer vision of Poland's eastern neighbours (new neighbours of NATO and EU), while those looking at us from the East, be they Russian, Belorussian or Ukrainian, has to face the fact that surely, most comprehensive and direct contact the West starts at the border with Poland.

Russians are inevitably irritated when a Polish diplomat is asked in a NATO/EU country about Russian policy, as they assume that an opinion given on such an occasion must be unfavourable to Rus-

sia, but as a matter of fact, Poles are fully aware of the fact that the inquirer in question is assessing both the Russian politics and Polish diplomacy's attitude to the Russian Federation. One needs to bear in mind one fundamental consideration: the high-and-rising level of approval for Poland among its NATO and EU partners acts in Russia's favour. This approval will contribute to Russia's acceptance in the West, where Russians are thought of as a Slavic people, like the Poles are, and who – again, just like Poles – have been living in a less developed part of Europe for centuries. The split into East and West was obviously not born during the Cold War. It stems from processes that took place between the 13th and the 17th c. that were consolidated only later. The view of Eastern Europe as underdeveloped is not just a stereotype. Yet this view does have something stereotypical about it. Moreover, Poland is now breaking away from it. We are making a change in the image of Poland as well as that of our neighbours. Highly developed nations are beginning to look at Poland from a different angle, but I also know for a fact that many ask why, if Poles are capable of breaking through their developmental barriers, should it be expected that Slavs from a less developed part of Europe, i.e. Russia, be incapable of doing so? Expecting Russia to be able to do this implies entertaining the possibility of accepting her, and acceptance is something that Russia is badly in need of.

Acceptance is needed and is indeed possible; yet I know Russians who will not settle just for that. They expect to be “invited” and believe that Poland was “invited by the West”, with Russia “being rejected”. This smacks of an inferiority complex and the hyper-sensitivity of the citizen of a fallen empire and, above all, a lack of understanding that the journey from periphery to semi-periphery and further into the world system's core is travelled chiefly through one's own efforts towards reform.

Russians are not the first or the last to grapple with the fall of empire. The dynamic of the world system is unrelenting, yet one may seek a new position in a variety of ways, such as those employed by Germany, France, Belgium, the UK, Spain or Portugal.

Still, the Russian expectation of an “invitation” has a rational element in it. Ultimately, the Russian Federation has advantages that Poland does not. Russia is a power, a unique power, in being bi-regional, The European as well as the Asian, and one that has nuclear weapons. Poland's final re-integration is very important for NATO and the EU, yet without the successful integration of Russia in the

world system we may all find ourselves facing deadly danger, hence the attempts to establish formal collaboration.

Poland and Russia will not be at loggerheads over the Kaliningrad district, as this exclave of the Russian Federation is quite simply an integral part of the Federation, and its fate depends primarily on how the Russian Federation develops. One should add that Kaliningrad will never become an enclave in the EU, as it has a legally guaranteed free sea route to the rest of the Federation. A possible claim that it does not have an equivalent land route might elicit this response: This is not a unique case of a state's territories being divided by the sea.

Despite appearances, our co-operation will not be jeopardised by the implementation at the borders with the Russian Federation (and Belarus and the Ukraine) of the Schengen regulations. Ultimately, the future border regime will be similar to the present arrangement for the EU's borders with Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, which by no means is pulling these countries out of relations with the EU. We must not allow the perfidious lobbying of mafia to dupe the media, or the concerns of law-abiding, albeit inadequately informed, citizens to get in the way of the enhancement of border controls or consular and customs services.

Naturally, development in Polish-Russian relations at the civil society level will depend not so much on the degree of civilised border controls as on the developmental condition of these societies. Right now, some of our partners have a problem with understanding the contents of the question about contacts at this level.

Russia will not be integrated with the European Union lest we are toying with the idea of the EU joining the Russian Federation. The EU and Russia may, however, establish an area of special economic co-operation. More than that, such an area might be set up by an enlarged NAFTA, an enlarged EU and other European countries, including the Russian Federation, with the doors being open to other countries. Russia's membership of the WTO would enable substantive discussion of this theme.

A formula for permanent co-operation with the Russian Federation is sought by NATO. Institutionally speaking, little else can be done without weakening the Alliance, but areas of co-operation might be agreed on, with relevant efforts aimed at joint action.

The Russian Federation cannot join NATO and the EU; UN membership will not be sufficient for the Russians, much less mem-

bership of other organisations, and so Russia should strive for a stronger foothold in a G-7 related system. However, a straightforward G-7 enlargement is not realistic. The G-7 members may invite Russians to their forum on occasion, so the media might even re-brand it the G-8, yet after such a G-8 meeting, the G-7 members inevitably retire to another club to talk, in their “insider” group, about the money, and not just that. Hence, there should be a drive towards formalising “The 8”. This may happen on the platform of commonality of interests among G-7 countries and the Russian Federation. “The 8” is the best institutional solution at present. It would be very important for Russia to participate in institutionalising “The 8” from its very outset. The emergence of an anti-terrorist coalition, with Russia’s participation, bodes well for such projects. Establishing co-operation within the framework of “The 8” in various groupings may engender new and much-needed solutions in fundamental aspects of international relations, with the participation of the Russian Federation (and Japan; China, India or Brazil slated for the future?). Some might say that, on this level, there is no more room for Polish-Russian relations – but they would be mistaken. After all, a permanent, broad-based, focused and direct co-operation of our closest allies and partners in the EU and NATO with an external power cannot be truly effective without the adequately structured participation of every NATO and EU member.

Poles and Russians need to talk more often, and the more contacts there are between Polish and Russian analysts, the better the understanding between the countries’ leaders. One opportunity for such a debate and mutual experience learning has been offered by the aforementioned conference, elevated to high significance by the patronage of the Polish President.

Along with our NATO allies and EU partners, we extend an invitation to our Russian neighbours to sail in the same direction.

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