Return to Europe:
Four years of
Poland’s EU membership

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Abstract
The standards of democracy and the set of values contained in the EU Treaties have developed over 50 years since the commitment to ‘an ever closer union was declared in the preamble to the Treaty of Rom. The process of accession to the EU has been a vital catalyst in steering the democratic and economic reforms in the new Central and Eastern European member states in a particular direction aligned with the objectives of the European Treaties.1 This article sets to assess levels of democratization and commitment to, broadly understood, European values in Poland after more than four years of European Union membership. It is based on analyses of some of the recent opinions polls. The discussion of prevailing in Polish society attitudes to the EU is placed in historical context. Issues relevant to democratization are related to some aspects of accession and post-accession processes. The main argument is considering the reasons and implication of the very weak support in Poland for the cultural aspects of EU integration and weak democratic consolidation of the Polish political system. The concept of Europeanization is used in the sense of collective commitment to goals and values perceived as ‘European’.

1. What is Europeanization?
Attempts to theorize this concept have not been very satisfactory. Most define Europeanization either in an open-ended and rather vague, or too narrow manner (Bulmer and Lequesne, 2004; Olsen, 2007; Featherstone and Radaelli, 2003).2 The former approaches focus mostly on the impact of European policies and politics on the Member States, and the latter, on specific MS responses to particular EU measures, including the acquis.3 There seems to be, however, a common

1 Domestic Constitutions of the new Member States have been adjusted to comply with the EU Treaties. See (Albi, 2005).
2 Another aspect of Europeanization encompassing the influence of the Council of Europe and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe will not be discussed in this paper.
3 Compare, for instance: (Borzel, 1999) with (Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier, 2005).
thread; most approaches agree that Europeanization is complex and contingent in nature, difficult to capture in terms of causality – beyond adoptions of the *acquis* – where the incentive of prospective membership played a decisive role in enticing compliance with the EU rules. Apart from the rather straightforward cases where the ‘*acquis* conditionality’ applies (Schummelfenning and Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 211), there is broad consensus that it is often difficult to define more precisely how the European Union influences domestic policies and politics of the Member States, beyond the certainty that it does.

Borzel (1999) suggested that Europeanization has something to do with the penetration of the European dimension in national arenas of politics and policy. Indeed, the uncertainties of causality and outcomes, in a sense of the impact on society, its values and aspirations, or politics, i.e., the nature and dynamics of Europeanization seem to confirm Borzel’s laconic statement. Radaelli, on the other hand, went closer to providing a more grounded understanding of Europeanization, by focusing on a number of specific processes:

Europeanization involves processes of construction, diffusion, and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ‘ways of doing things’ and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU public policy and politics and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourse, identities, structures, and public policies. (Radaelli, 2003, p. 30)

Still, Radaelli’s and most other approaches to Europeanization, leave open some fundamental questions, particularly in relation to the transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). One of the most important seems to be: which direction would the transition countries take without the external pressure from the EU? Or, in other words, to what extent can it be asserted that the EU has been causally important for developments in domestic politics and society if we accept that the adoption of the *acquis* and other binding measures should be excluded from this question, since the causal link between the EC law and its domestic implementation is relatively obvious (Haverland, 2005)?

2. Europeanization of the CEE countries

There is another reason why the lack of a satisfactory theoretical model of Europeanization poses a particular challenge in relation to the CEE countries. And that is the overlap between the post-communist transformations which started in 1990, with the accession to the EU and a generic Europeanization/globalisation, which, in part, results from open borders and internationalization of economy as well as domestic pressures and reforms. This overlap makes it difficult to separate
the two: changes due to Europeanization per se and those driven by other forces. Similar problems have been identified by Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier, who attempted to develop theoretical models of Europeanization specifically in relation to Central and Eastern Europe. These models are based on a relatively narrow definition of Europeanization focused on ‘normative governance’ and understood as ‘a process in which states adopt to EU rules’ (Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 7). Emphasis on institutionalization of the EU rules means the restructuring of domestic institutions according to EU rules, or the change of domestic political practices according to the EU standards.

The three models that Schimmelfenning and Sedelmeier use, the ‘external incentives model’, ‘social learning model’ and ‘lesson-drawing model’ all focus on the dynamics/logic/mechanics of adoption of EU rules. Although this is undoubtedly useful for analyzing the various strategies and underlying factors determining the success or its lack in rule adoption, the issues of cause and effect cannot always be clearly distinguished. Also, those models are useful in explaining the processes retrospectively, but, due to their only weakly determinable nature, any viable predictions as to the future, which could lead to forming an effective policy of rule adoption will be risky, at best. The case of Slovakia provides a good illustration. Its Prime Minister, choose to ignore the conditions set out by the EU in a bid to preserve his political power (Schimmelfenning, Engert, and Knobel, 2006, p. 50). This kind of contingent factors – the individual drive to stay in power – will not be easily captured by any of the suggested models even under the most likely set of circumstances.

If we move from the rule adoption approach and try to draw a line between those changes taking place in CEEs purely as a result of EU membership and in separation from other factors, or to describe the nature of the dynamics between the two in any specific manner, things become even more unclear. Contingencies of history and culture may complicate such tasks even further. This suggests that the existing paradigms of Europeanization might not be helpful in capturing such dynamics, and that developments in each state should be considered as a separate case-study.

Given the uncertainties identified above, my agenda is relatively modest: I will try to illustrate one country’s road to Europeanization, i.e., Poland’s commitment to European goals and values, with particular emphasis democratization, after four years of EU membership.

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4 This is likely to be the case as the two strongest incentives of rule adoption: the democratic conditionality and the acquis conditionality will no longer apply.
3. Is Poland a European state?

The majority of Poles think so. In March 2007, an opinion poll on the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome⁵ asked if this commemoration was also a Polish event. The results were as follows: 53.3% of Poles answered ‘yes’ because they agree that Poland has always belonged to Europe. 14.3% agreed, by saying that Europe is regaining the unity which is lost 50 years ago. Only 8.3% said ‘no’ stating that Western Europe had forgotten Poland after the WWII. There were also 13.4% negative answers giving the short time of Polish membership in the EU as the reason for saying that the celebrations do not really mean much for the Poles. Relatively high, at 10.5 was the percentage of ‘don’t knows’.

More than a half of answers positively asserted Poland’s place in Europe in historic perspective. This might be interpreted in a number of ways. Probably the most accurate will be to understand this as a declaration of a sense of belonging to European culture and civilization. This interpretation, however, poses an important question: is this sense of belonging grounded in a testable reality, or it is just a sentiment based on a long-held aspiration. The historical, political and economic evidence is confusing. The historic event of Partitions, i.e., the occupation of Poland by Germany, the Austrio-Hungary and Russia throughout the almost two hundred years of modernity, is a testimony of close relations with the West and East of Europe, even if those relations were rooted in hostility of occupation. The rejection of the occupants influences by the majority of oppressed Poles, cannot be taken to mean that such influences played no role in shaping the society and culture through such a reversed dialectic. In fact, it has been confirmed that the partition zones are still discernible on Poland’s political, cultural and economic map after almost ninety years since Polish Independence (Krygier, 1999). Even a quick tour of Poland reveals visible differences in external appearances of towns and villages between the three occupational zones. Those differences do not end at the externalities; regional cuisine, cultural outlook, religiosity and political preferences are other factors defined by the influences of Germany and Austria in the West and North, and Russia in the East (Davis, 1997).

There is also a symbolic dimension to the story of Poland’s Partition; two of the three occupying powers, Prussia (later Germany) and Russia, are Europe’s two extremes representing the West and the East or, in other words, Western Civilization and Eastern Despotism (Zarycki, 1997, p. 97). Poland’s aspirations to be part of the West are best seen within this paradigm, part of which includes an inferi-

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⁵ Conducted by Research International Pentor. Results available at: http://www.pentor.pl/48648.xml
ority complex related to Poland’s economic underdevelopment, lack of democracy and political freedoms, and being firmly classed as belonging to the East of Europe (Tazbir, 2007). This sense of inferiority was deepened by the civilisational distance from the West. Those sentiments, in turn, shaped a particular type of Polish patriotism, which sustained the nation during Partitions. Rooted in religious righteousness and the Romantic ethos popularised by the nineteen century poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, this curious mixture of sentiments evolved into a sense of Messianic Mission towards Western Europe – to convert Western Europe to Polish values. To sum up – the Polish attitude to Europe in modernity have little grounding in reality or reason. In contrast, it was a combination of sentiments: admiration for what the West represented, and longing to be part of it, with a sense of a moral mission to save Europe from itself.

Even though, the lore of belonging to Europe has been constructed using Russia as the negative point of reference, or as the opposite of the West, i.e., backward, despotic and disorderly (Zarycki, 1997, p. 99), no moral crusade was contemplated in the direction of the East. The sentiment was rather one of disassociation and denial of cultural closeness. Those attitudes never entirely disappeared and are likely to harden further given the current revival of the cold war rhetoric. This return to the ideologically driven, grand-narrative based politics, is an unwelcome development in a wider European context, also unhelpful if the myth of Western superiority and Eastern backwardness in ever to be dismantled.

4. Poland’s Europeanization or return to Europe?

Poland’s position between the East and the West was one of the strongest factors influencing not just political history, but also her national culture and societal outlook. One of the most enduring political and social aspiration was to be seen as part of the West, to belong to the civilised part of Europe, and to stress Poland’s distance from Russia – the East. The development of one of Poland’s most persistent ideologies – the ‘return to Europe’ – should be seen in this context. The ‘return’

6 J. Tazbir commented that the French ‘Histoire de l’Europe’, which was going to be the prototype of the textbook on the history of Europe sanctioned by the European Union, mentions Poland only sparingly and only as a country on the periphery of Europe proper. Tazbir points out that almost all text on history of Europe, including the French ‘Histoire de l’Europe’, stop on the Elba line. Anything beyond this are the ‘far provinces of Europe’. Curiously, according to most sources Poland or Baltic states are placed in Central Eastern Europe, France or Germany belong to Western and not Central-Western part of the continent.

7 Even though Donald Tusk’s government is more pro-European than the previous PiS formation, the installation of anti-missile defence system in Eastern Poland is still on the agenda. Partly in response to this Putin announced a multimillion dollars plan to re-militarise Russia. This signals a revival of cold-war type of political discourse.
symbolises resistance of the Poles in the face of a threat from the ‘barbaric’ East and, German expansionism from the West.

The ideology of ‘return’ was particularly strong and considered crucial to Polish national survival in times of crises such as the Partitions, when Poland ceased to exist as a state for almost two hundred years, and more recently – during the period of Soviet Domination and state-socialism. Now that the Poles have regained the freedom to decide their destiny, the return to Europe has taken place in the most literal sense as an entry into the EU. However, the singing up and the institutional and legal reforms to accommodate the *acquis* aside, this particular return to Europe has many meanings and connotations. Probably most significant is the turn from largely sceptical, to becoming the most enthusiastic nation about Europe. 86% think that EU membership is beneficial for Poland. Among the general benefits, the most important were: increased international security – identified by 58% of Poles – better position of Poland in Europe (68%), higher economic growth (75%) and falling unemployment (56%), and a better protection of natural environment (57%). Most of these statistics are straightforward to interpret. Agricultural subsidies are the main aspect of Europeanization for the Polish farmers. For the unemployed, now able to seek work abroad it will be the open borders and job-markets. None of those pragmatic gains, however, fit particularly well with the broad national sentiments that currently dominate Poland’s attitude to Europe, roots of which go back to 19th and early 20th centuries: nationalism, fear of new ideas, social censorship, repressiveness towards any groups deviating from the mainstream religious and moral culture. For the EU, the Polish return brings many problems: demands for more voting power, the lack of enthusiasm for European social and cultural values, and the moral mission to save Europe.

5. **Poland and ‘Western values’: Europeanization of Poland or Polonization of Europe?**

The economic integration within the EU is widely supported by the Poles, as its benefits are clearly visible. This is also reflected in opinion polls, where 86% of

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8 Based on CBOS poll ‘Ocena Skutków Przystąpienia Polski do UE po trzech latach członkostwa’ (*Assessment of results of Poland’s accession to the EU after three years of membership*) conducted 30 March–2 April 2007, on representative sample of 937 adults.

9 Compare with (Żuk, 2007, pp. 10, 16).

10 See ‘Opinie o Funkcjonowaniu UE’ (*Opinions about the Functioning of the EU*) BS/155/2005, Warszawa, September 2005, where 68% of Euro enthusiasts rejected cultural aspects of European Integration.

11 The Poles insisted that the EU should be based on Christian values. Recently, they blocked the EU protest over the death penalty, Reported in *The Guardian*, 12 Sep. 2007.
Polish Euro-enthusiasts and 60% Euro-sceptics support the economic aspect of European Integration. On the other hand, even the Euro-enthusiasts reject cultural aspects of European Union membership (68%). This unusually high percentage of Euro-enthusiast rejecting the cultural aspect of integration deserves closer attention. However, the analysis of this statistics might be problematic, since the EU impact on culture and societal values is more difficult to capture, and not just in a sense of attempting to quantify specific processes, or to identify a cause and effect. To understand the dynamics of the processes of, what must be a mutual adjustment between the member states and the EU, is never simple, beyond a rather trite assertion that such a process is indeed taking place. For instance, it is not clear if for the Poles, a return to Europe means embracing European values or, if the general sentiment is one of strengthening and preservation of Polish national identity. If the latter is the case, is this process based on mutual accommodation or antagonism? The rejection of the cultural aspect of European integration by the Poles suggests the latter. This is confirmed by the revival of Messianic Mission, of ‘saving Europe’ through moral regeneration and return to Christian values. Two of the main plagues that Europe needs saving from are the ‘godless’ ideologies of liberalism and consumerism.

Why is the mission of saving Europe being revived in Poland? Is it based on an informed judgement of what Europe represents for the Poles and rational rejection of European values? Or is there another explanation? I suggest, that the knowledge and understanding of European values in Poland might be based less on experiential knowledge, than on abstract understanding of what they are. This lack of practical knowledge and familiarity with those values might be the reason why the Poles reject most of them outright, without a debate.

The tradition of public debates and deliberations in Poland is weak. The limited scope of this paper does not allow for a fuller discussion of this, but I suggest that the short period of Poland’s independence in modernity must have been a strong factor. The brief period of eleven years (1918–1939) which was overshadowed by the fascist politics and authoritarian coup d’état in 1935, was not sufficient to allow for development of democratic institutions such as public debates or political and social pluralism. Given those weaknesses of modernization, it can be suggested that the foundations of the Polish myth of belonging to the symbolic ‘West’ are

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13 94% of Poles are proud of being Polish. This is the highest percentage among all the Member States. See Eurobarometer, country report for Poland, Autumn 2006, p. 33.
14 See the PiS political manifesto, available at: http://lechkaczynski.pl/program.php?p=1&st=2. It is clear that PiS a conservative, nationalistic-catholic formation with strong anti-liberal bias, which is presented as synonymous with private greed, anarchy and corruption. See also (Osiatyński, 2007).
rooted more strongly in a pre-modern rather than modern era. Historic evidence seem to support such a claim. In 15th–17th centuries Poland was at the heart of Europe, a powerful actor, and at times a leader of Catholic powers against the Ottoman empire. The Polish era of greatness lasted till the end of XVIII century, to the Partitions. It seems that the Poles missed on the experience of modernization and democratization in the XIX and XX-the centuries. The post-war era did not change this as Polish political system was a mixture of totalitarianism and authoritarianism. Legacy of those historical traits are still visible in contemporary Poland, where the attributes of ‘modern state’ are often missing (Marody and Wilkin, 2004, p. 182).

Hence, even though the great majority of Poles and the political elites declare that they identify with ‘Western values’ of which democracy, pluralism or tolerance are the most prominent, it is clear that the meaning of such declarations might not be what it seems. This should not be surprising in a country where the experience of social reality both historically and in a more contemporary sense, was far removed from any sense of democratic set up. The last 18 years of political freedom failed to stimulate practical learning of democracy. The political elites and the media used the language of democracy and tolerance instrumentally, corrupting the meaning of those terms and creating semantic confusion. The language of official political discourse and fundamental laws, such as the Constitution, is full of references to freedom, democracy and pluralism. Yet, the evidence of democratic practice is much less convincing, not just in Poland, but in other CEE new member states.

Apart from pledged affinity with democratic values, some elements of the ‘myth of belonging’ relate also to a number of distinctly Polish developments in most recent history, particularly those challenging totalitarian politics of the Soviet Union during the five decades of Soviet political control. For instance, failure of collectivisation of agriculture allowed for private ownership of land, unprecedented in the countries dominated by the Soviet Union. The mass popular support for the Catholic Church forced the state to accommodate rather than eliminate its role in society, in contrast with Russia or East Germany. The state sponsorship allowed many writers and film directors to flourish. Provided that they learned how to play the censorship game, they enjoyed relative freedom of

15 Many Mediterranean influences such as Polish Christianity, Latin alphabet, a large percentage of words of Greek, Latin and neo-Latin (French) as well as civilisation-forming influence of German culture and in language support the claim of belonging.
16 Most famous has been the Jan the III Sobieski’s victory at the gates of Vienna in 1683.
17 Particularly relevant is chapter IV and the concept of ‘selective modernization’, p. 182.
18 The usual practice used by many film directors was to add a few deliberately provocative scenes with the intention to divert the attention of the censor who would cut those scenes leaving
expression and were revered as intellectual and spiritual leaders of the country.¹⁹ Those circumstances rendered Poland the least totalitarian and most free of the Communist countries. Also helpful was the relative openness to Western culture through literature, music and film, all subsidised by the state, as well as the ties with the West through the Parisian ‘Culture’ and network of support for political dissidents and artists.

All this, however, had not been enough to break the sense of isolation from the West. The restrictions on travel – political and financial – translated into almost universal lack of experiential knowledge of real-life functioning of Western democracies.²⁰ As a result, the West has been romanticised and idealised as the land of the free, with perfectly democratic systems of governance. On this and other evidence, it is clear that the Poles’ claim of belonging related more to a symbolic rather than to a known reality of the West. More crucially, such sentiments created a false sense of familiarity with the democratic values associated with the West. It also created an illusion that the core of Polishness is constituted by these values, and that once the oppressive political regime would be removed, Poland would emerge as free and democratic. The reality of Poland in 2007 contradicts this picture in some important sense.²¹

The behaviour/attitudes of both the people and the political elites after 1989 in Poland, and in other Eastern European new Member States confirm that the abstract understanding of democratic and liberal values dominates. There are many instances of widespread lack of respect for pluralism and diversity, sanctioned by central and local governments in Poland (Zuber, 2007, pp. 215–30) and other transition countries. The homophobic outlook of the new Member states in Eastern Europe, forceful promotion of Catholic values as the only accepted worldview in Poland, or persistent anti-Semitism and racism are just some of the publicly declared views of political and governmental elites.²² There is also a clear predominance of stereotypes in shaping perception of others: nations/ethnic groups, gays and lesbians, other religions, and so on (Majka-Rostek, 2004). Most problematic is not so much the dominance of such values, but their endorsement and

¹⁹ A reflection of this was the very high percentage, in comparison with other countries, of intellectuals, directors and actors elected in Poland’s first semi-free elections of 1989.
²⁰ Only one in eight or nine of Poles travelled to Western Europe before the 2004.
²² See the ‘Crucible of hate’ in The Guardian, G2, 1 Jun. 2007, on the violent homophobia of Eastern Europe. See also the PBS DGA Poll for the ‘Gazeta Wyborcza, 2 Jun. 2007, where 58% of Poles stated that the Jews talk too much about the Holocaust and majority would not wish a person of Roma or Jewish ethnicity to marry their child.
legitimization in public discourse by the governing elites. Promotion of those values in often seen as contributing to the moral renewal of Europe.

Apart from the two strands of arguments – one of which postulates surrender to European values – and the second one, which sees a need to replace European values with Polish ones, there exists a third strand, which considers the possibility of mutual adjustment of both European and Polish values. This approach sometimes leads to unexpectedly reductionistic logic, as evidence in the writings of Krzysztofek. He posed the following question: ‘What should be done with those values and patterns which prove non-functional for our (Poland’s) integration with Europe while forming, at the same time, a core of our identity?’ (1999, p. 92) In his paper, Krzysztofek preceded this question by a discussion on ‘giving up values’ and ‘adaptation losses’ as a price which the Poles could be asked to pay to preserve the ability to co-operate with Western Europe. He suggested that some of these values have to be regarded as ‘non-compatible’ with the civilisation currents dominating Western Europe. Further, Krzysztofek advocates the urgent and ‘of utmost importance’ need to fill any gaps in the culture of the Poles with ‘genuine Polish culture’, by active cultural policies carried out on regional and local level (Krzysztofek, 1999, p. 92).  

There is an opinion shared by a significant group in our society that we are in possession of values Europe needs, so it should adopt them in its own interest. (p. 91).

This part of Krzysztofek’s argument becomes excessively ethnocentric, and even megalomaniac at times as it rejects ‘returning to Europe’ in favour of a desire to ‘convert’ it to the proper faith. This is based on the belief that the Poles are the only ones to have preserved such faith and who are able to point the right way to heal the ‘sick spirit of Europe’ – an echo of the ‘Messianic Mission’?

6. European Union in popular perception: between myth and reality

In 2003 over 50% of Poles believed that the European Union institutions work well, despite low levels of knowledge about what the institutions do and how they operate (Sadurski, 2003, p. 35). Interestingly, only three years later, in an opinion poll conducted in Autumn 2006, two-thirds of Poles declared their familiarity with the way the EU functions. This was the highest score in the EU. The declared interest in European affairs was also the highest in the EU. However, these high

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23 The author calls for active cultural policy which would focus on ‘genuine Polish culture’. This type of ‘cultural megalomania’, has been blamed by, among others, M. Janion for the intolerance and lack of acceptance of diversity and difference currently prevailing in Poland. (Gazeta Wyborcza, 1 Oct. 2004).
scores should be taken cautiously, since only 5% of Poles seek information about the EU often and a further 24% do so frequently. Given that there is very little information available in the popular media and/or in television (even the 50th anniversary of the Treaty of Rome received minimal coverage), the low levels of activity in seeking such information renders claims to familiarity and high interest in the EU rather doubtful. The need for sceptical reading of those results is confirmed by some additional data: the sense of engagements in European matters declares only 15% of Poles, which is below the European average.

The hysterical statements characteristic of the pre-accession stage, that not being accepted into the EU will bring a total catastrophe which would have led to ‘the collapse of Polish civilisation’ (Suchocka, 1995), might have contributed to shaping the over-enthusiastic attitudes of the Poles, grounded in myths and delusions. I called them hysterical since the joining of the EU was presented as the only chance for Poland to emerge from decades of economic underdevelopment and cultural decline. Yet, the opinion polls suggest that the Poles have, at best, a rather foggy idea on just how the EU can save Poland from catastrophe of civilization. The fact remains that the pre-accession period has been dominated by the hope of being saved by the EU, which went hand in hand with the strong sense of the EU as a threat to Polish national culture, in particular, her Catholic values. Those ambiguities have been used as a political point-scoring by most political parties, when they tried to respond to the perceived sensitivities related to the loss of sovereignty which the EU membership entails, so soon after liberation from the Soviet control.

The double theme of high expectations towards the EU and the need to protect Poland against it, was clearly visible in the Polish election campaign for the European Parliament. Maria Janion, commented that this campaign was based on the paradigm of Poland against the rest of Europe and a Polish crusade against Europe. Some examples of phrases used in this campaign:

- Poland has to defend itself,
- Europe is threatening Poland,
- The Polish Euro parliamentarians must work for Poland, not for Europe,
- The Poles will bring Europe Christian faith and customs which Europe has forgotten (2003).

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24 Compare with Szczerbiak (2004).
25 There is a consensus on this. This point has been repeated in a number of publications. See for instance Zarycki (1997).
26 Contrary to such perception, opinion polls established that the potential loss of sovereignty is of little concern for the Poles. See Eurobarometer Country Report for Poland, Autumn 2006. 60% of Poles supports the Political Integration with the EU. For a different view see for instance: (Albi, 2005, pp. 78–80).
This last one – a clear reference to Poland’s mission to save Europe.

Among a number of tensions which the paradigm ‘Poland versus Europe’ contains, one, in particular, stands out: the perception of Europe as a threat assumes the weakness of Polish culture and identity which can so easily be destroyed. Yet, it also reveals a lack of faith in the ability of the Polish state to modernize itself: if we ask why so many people supported the accession the answer would have to be: because Poles in fact do not believe in their own state, in their own capacities, in their own elites. They do not believe that their own state can be the principal factor of modernization and of the transformation for the better. This is what the EU constitutes for the Poles. (Sadurski, 2003, p. 35)

7. Poland’s road to democracy via the EU

Can Europe steer Poland towards consolidation of democracy?

The prospect of joining the EU raised high hopes for improving and consolidating democracy in the new Member States. This has been confirmed in opinion polls in the late 1990s (Sadurski, 2003, p. 33). More recent opinion polls also confirm that the expectations towards the EU continue to be high and that they are partially based on the belief, recently gaining support in Poland, that the EU institutions function well, and that the quality of EU governance should be copied on domestic level. This suggests, as argued above, that – despite declaration to the contrary – the Poles’ understanding of how the EU operates is rather poor. Following this logic, it can be argued that the hope of consolidation of democracy under the influence of the EU might also have semi-mythical origin which, in part, relate back to the conviction rooted in the era of state-socialism’ that anything from the West is good.

This over-inflated trust in the EU contrasts with the persisting disappointment with the state of Polish democracy. 70% of Poles are dissatisfied with the state of Polish democracy, and a still higher percentage believe that Poland is closer to a non-democratic than to democratic system (CBOS, 2006). These results remain consistent for best part of the post-1989 era. Moreover, a recent high number of public appeals, by academics and politicians calling for the restoration of basic standards of democracy and the rule of law might suggest that Polish politics is more undemocratic and authoritarian than at other times after 1989. Hence, it

27 See n. 12.

28 Sadurski claim that this phenomenon is not confined to Poland; ‘Citizens of the CEE do not trust and do not like their own states: fourteen years after the advent of democracy the belief in their own institutions is very low’ (2003, p. 35).

29 See for instance: Posłanie do polskiej opinii publicznej (Message to Polish public opinion),
seems that the first three years of the EU membership failed to realise the hope of strengthening democratic system in Poland. The persistence of such hope, however, can be taken as evidence of failure to capitalise on the accession and improve the image of Polish politics by subsequent Polish governments.30

The tension between the high trust in the EU – based on myth rather than real knowledge of its functioning – and a deep mistrust of their own politicians may take Poland in a number of problematic directions. It may undermine trust in the EU without raising trust in domestic institutions, leaving people disillusioned and withdrawn even further from the political process. The worst possible scenario might be, however, the loss of faith in democracy as an ideal,31 as this could potentially pave the way to the increased support for other than democratic forms of government, as is the case in Russia.32

So, what went wrong during the decade and a half of reforms and in the processes of pre-accession and accession?

It is clear by now, that democratic procedures were neglected in pre-accession and accession stages. This was partly a result of a time pressure and a desire to join as quickly as possible. There was no debate, not even in the Polish Parliament (Sejm), and little information was available in mass media on European matters.33 The quest for EU membership was presented as the only possible way forward. As a result, apathy rather than hostility threatened a negative outcome and was the main problem in the accession referendum. The Pope’s intervention was one of the most decisive factors behind Poland’s ‘yes’ vote. The publicity campaign in

signed by Wałęsa, Kwaśniewski and Olechowski on 17 May 2007, available at http://www.obywatele.org.pl, or the Resolution passed by the Senate of the Warsaw University, representing more than three thousand academics ‘Uchwała w sprawie zagrożeń dla demokratycznego państwa prawnego’ (Resolution on the threats to democratic rule of law state) (Gazeta Wyborcza, 22 Mar. 2007).

30 Many commentators argued that taking Poland into the EU will boost the popularity of national governments. See for instance: (Sadurski, 2003, p. 35).

31 Recent opinion poll confirmed that the support for the ideal of democracy is strong among the Poles, with over 60% agreeing that democracy is superior to all other forms of government. CBOS, op. cit., n. 22.

32 Putin, whose popularity consistently stands at over 70%, introduced security rather than democracy in Russia.

33 . . . after the tense accession referendum, the more specific issues associated with Poland’s participation in the EU practically vanished from the media and politician’s statements, although even beforehand they had not occupied much space, if one discounts the purely emotional appeals calling, on the one hand, to defend national sovereignty and, on the other, to not squander the opportunity to accelerate civilizational development. [...] This ... can be explained by the low familiarity with internal EU issues, not just among politicians but also among their broader support structure (Marody & Wilkin 2004: 193). President Kwaśniewski lamented: ‘in this huge country of 40 million people I found seven individuals with knowledge of agricultural issues and European policy’ (Gazeta Wyborcza 5–6 Jul. 2003).
2003, prior to the referendum on whether to join, can be described as ‘patronising’ and one-sided (Marody and Wilkin, 2004, p. 172). Not only did it fail to ignite popular interest in the EU, but it further alienated the governing elites from the people.\textsuperscript{34} The government which took Poland into the EU lost the elections in 2005.\textsuperscript{35} The politics of the PiS Polish government leaned towards anti-Europeanism and has been largely engaging in power-struggles, such as, the insistence on the voting system proposed in Nice, which gives Poland a better leverage of power than the one proposed in the European Constitution.\textsuperscript{36} The current government of Tusk liberal party is more pro-European, at least in its declarations. However, the suggestion that: ‘EU was and is treated as a spring-board to boost Poland’s position on the international arena’ (Wyborcza, 2007) still rings true.\textsuperscript{37}

The lack of interest of Polish political elites in all things European\textsuperscript{38} and the low priority afforded to effective and sensitive adjustment of Polish laws and regulations\textsuperscript{39} to European standards, coupled with an absence of debate on European issues suggest, that the way European agenda is dealt with in domestic politics might be partial and instrumental. Judging by the evidence of the harm that domestic politics can inflict on domestic perception of the EU,\textsuperscript{40} the Poles attitudes to the EU will not remain immune to such influences for long, although it is difficult to predict just how they may change.

\textsuperscript{34} Compare with: G. (Pridham, 2002, p. 954) See also Puchalska (2005), particularly the discussion of the ‘syndrome of abandoned society’.

\textsuperscript{35} SLD (Sojusz Lewicy Demokratycznej) lost 35\% of mandates in comparison with elections in 2001. The winner of the 2005, the PiS (Prawo i Sprawiedliwosc) moved up from 9.6\% to 33.7\% in 2005. Data available on Sejm web-site at http://www.sejm.gov.pl.

\textsuperscript{36} The demand for a more voting power has been repeated by the Kaczyński brothers at the European Summit in Brussels (21-22 June 2007), using argument referring to the Nazi genocide (if not for the 6 million Poles who perished during the WWII, Poland would have reached similar to Germany population).

\textsuperscript{37} Gazeta Wyborcza, 3 Feb. 007 available at: http://www.gazeta.pl

\textsuperscript{38} The debate on the EU Constitution revived recently by Angela Merkel has been largely ignored by Polish politicians and the media. Poland has nothing to contribute to the Constitutional debate, apart from the demand that the reference to Christian values be included in the Preamble. The Polish government is quietly hoping that the Constitution will collapse and the topic will go away.

Finally, the anniversary of the Treaty of Rome received very little attention in Polish media and public discourse.

\textsuperscript{39} Marody and Wilkin pointed out that the ‘the narrow understanding of the process of harmonisation as above all the incorporation of new legal texts did not consider existing dissimilarity between Polish and EU legal cultures. The different understanding of the nature of law in Poland, as well as the absence of a culture of legal discourse – […] led to serious interpretative deficiencies and increased the internal incompatibility of the entire institutional system’ (2004, p. 181).

\textsuperscript{40} Particularly effective in shaping Eurosceptic attitudes are some of British politicians who use the EU as an ammunition to win their domestic battles. British tabloids are another, and very effective anti-European influence.
8. Accession: Lost chance to democratize Polish politics?

The lack of consultations and lack of popular engagement/input into the process of accession to the EU fed into more general dynamics of failure of democratic politics after 1989. Particularly problematic in this context was the elitism an authoritarianism of the accession politics strongly reminiscent of the first years of systemic reforms. The pragmatics took over democratic considerations as there was no real consultation or debate on the accession process. Yet, the accession to the EU had been a momentous event in Polish history, as was the political breakthrough of 1989, both rare historical events, and both potentially capable to mobilise and engage the people in democratic politics. It seems, though, that at both of these historical junctions the chance to democratise Polish society and politics has been missed.

Despite those failures of popular democratization, Poland passed the EU criteria for democracy on entry to the EU. It is clear that the assessment of the level of compliance with the criteria was based on only formal indicators of democratic governance (Pridham, 2002). Even the initial encounter with the political practice is bound to reveal evidence of serious weaknesses of democratic processes and the rule of law. The rushed adaptation of laws resulted in over-inflated role of the government of the day, and a diminished role of the Parliament. This strengthened the tendency to concentrate power in the executive branch which continue to dominate the political process today. The current Polish Constitution stops short of providing the Polish Parliament (Sejm) with power to be included in European policy-making. (This obviously goes against the spirit of the ToA ‘Protocol on the Role of National Parliaments in the EU’). The only formal mechanism open to MP’s is a routine question to a minister within the framework of parliamentary question time. The absence of formal mechanisms of including Sejm is one part of the problem – more serious, however, is the ‘low capacity in terms of comprehension and access to expertise’ of the Sejm itself. And let me quote:

41 To become part of the EU, the ten candidate countries had first and foremost to be recognized as European States (Article 49 of the EU Treaty) and secondly to comply with the so called Democratic Conditionality criteria of freedom, democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (Article 6 of the EU Treaty). They also had to fulfill the economic and political conditions known as the Copenhagen criteria, according to which a candidate country should: be a stable democracy, respect human rights and the rule of law and protect minorities; have a working market economy; adopt the common rules, standards and policies which make up the body of EU law.

42 The Freedom House report pointed this out as a reason for worse rating of Polish national democratic governance. (Freedom House, 2006, p. 2).
The Sejm will soon be flooded by EU legislative proposals, but it does not have the technical or intellectual capabilities to deal with them. [...] Please do not confer upon the parliament any additional oversight functions with regard to our accession to the EU, because Sejm is incapable of performing even the most rudimentary oversight functions in internal policy. (Sadurski, 2003, p. 53)

Sadurski further suggests that the level of competence of parliamentarians in other new Member States is probably not much better (2003, p. 53). The continuous weakness of democratic politics and the poorly developed political culture in those countries bode badly for a quick improvement in this area.

Poland’s failure to consolidate democracy during the EU membership with impunity might be related to the fact that ‘democratic test’ on accession has not been followed by any ongoing audits, even though Poland, as other EEC countries, is considered as either ‘flawed democracy’ or ‘nation in transit’. The absence of such audits is to some extent excusable, since the politics and processes behind the governing institutions are notoriously difficult to assess, and it is possible to argue that it might not be necessary to carry out such assessments too often, as the maturing and developing of democratic systems takes time. However, if the social and political costs of democratic transitions are likely to be significant and if there might be a danger of a country drifting towards other than democratic alternatives, the system of audits might be useful to at least alert the EU to such developments. It seems that the EU is uniquely well placed to develop such a system of auditing the effectiveness of democratic conditionality, since it has the necessary resources and structures to conduct such checks. The high acceptance of the EU in the new MS endows it with a considerable capital of popular trust and legitimacy, which, in turn, strengthens its credibility as a overseer and guarantor of democratic standards. Governments would find it difficult to justify any attempts to avoid such checks.

The argument for establishing a system of ongoing checks on democracy finds support not only in Polish opinion polls, which consistently show a very low level of satisfaction with the state of Polish democracy, but also in sources such as the World Democracy Index, where Poland is placed in the flawed democracy group, one third above the bottom of the table at 46. The European Freedom House reports points out deteriorating ratings of democracy in Poland, in relation to most criteria, with only Civil Society and Local Government retaining the same rating as in 2005 (Freedom House, 2006).

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43 Recently the EP voted to send a fact-finding mission to Poland, to investigate the proposed legislation banning the promotion of homosexuality in schools and universities.

44 Available at: http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/DEMOCRACY_TABLE_2007_v3.pdf
9. Anti-European value consensus in Poland

There is yet another factor which might upset the Poles hopes of consolidating democracy with the assistance of the EU: the value-consensus being formed by the mostly pro-European electorate and events such as the 2005 elections where the PiS government, probably the most anti-European of all Polish governments since the 1989, took office. The explanation of this apparent paradox might lie in that the Poles are enthusiastic about the economic aspects of European integration (freedom of movement, economic development, EU structural/regional funds and agricultural subsidies), but decidedly against value – based, cultural side of it. That might suggest that there is a degree of convergence between the governmental Catholic conservatism and the general outlook of Polish society, particularly since many opinion polls confirmed the Poles as one of the most homophobic, racists and intolerant in Europe. This type of value-consensus binding Polish society and government, described by some commentators as theo-democracy, stands in contrast to the declared, pro-European outlook of the 86% of Poles.

Can the theo-democracy currently unfolding in Poland become the new legitimacy platform for the subsequent Polish governments? Will the Christian crusade for moral salvation of Europe conducted by the Poles, rooted in this type of value-consensus, grow to become the new force of national unity in Poland? There is some evidence to suggest that this might be the case. The recent electoral victory of the Liberals lead by Donald Tusk is unlikely to threaten this consensus or to stop Poland’s move towards Catholic fundamentalism as the base for its domestic politics.

Does it matter in context of European Union? Probably not much, given the weakness of EU democratic conditionality mechanism. After all, stable political institutions, guarantees for democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights,
fundamental freedoms and minority rights,\textsuperscript{48} seems to exist, at least formally. Until the Catholic fundamentalism will pose a distinct and direct threat to any of the above, there will, probably, be no issue.

10. Conclusions

The evidence of the first four years of Poland’s European membership provides a confused picture: Poland is less democratic, more conservative and authoritarian than four years ago. Yet, the EU membership is perceived as beneficial for Poland’s democratization and economic growth. This tally with the evidence that the persisting in Poland high enthusiasm for Europe is based on a poor understanding of how the EU works, and that it is limited to economic aspects of integration. There is much more scepticism in relation to European social and cultural values. The Poles, alongside other new Europeans, remain conservative and intolerant towards ethnic, sexual and religious minorities. Their reassertion of ‘Polishness’ and attempts to impose core Catholic values on Europe seems to confirm the megalomaniac attitudes and a sense of mission to save the godless continent. None of the approaches to Europeanization discussed at the beginning of this paper seem to capture this particular case-scenario. Yet, the type of political and cultural attitudes prevailing in Poland might prove to be destructive to the European integration in any other than economic sense.\textsuperscript{49} The hope that the EU membership would guarantee political stability and consolidation of democracy in Poland might be correct, but more in a symbolic than real-life dimension.

References


\textsuperscript{48} available at: http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/atwork/_documents/dgenvlargementbrochure/sld005.htm

\textsuperscript{49} The recent sceptical voice on Polish prospects of Europeanization is that of Janusz Majcherek, who argued that Poland will not become European state, as long as it will limit its involvement in European project to taking money from the EU and rejecting Europe’s modern culture. ‘Chodzi o przekształcenia cywilizacyjne, o dostosowanie do europejskich standardow, europelizację kraju. Nie uda się tego dokonać, czerpiąc z Europy jedynie pieniądze, a nic z jej nowoczesnej kultury’ in Gazeta Wyborcza, 13 Sep. 2007.


*Gazeta Wyborcza* [online] 3 Feb. 2007 available at: http://www.gazeta.pl


PBS DGA Poll for *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 2 Jun. 2007; available at: www.gazeta.pl


