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POLAND AND THE ARAB SPRING. SELECTED PROBLEMS

The foundations of the Polish foreign policy

The roots of the Polish foreign policy go back to the collapse of Communism and the winding down of the Cold War. In 1989 ‘round table’ talks between the Communists and opposition leaders led to an agreement for reforming the political system. Since then there have been increasingly dramatic advances towards greater democracy and freedom. A market-oriented economy replaced the central planned one. The democratization of the state initiated in 1989 provides a strong foundation for foreign policy and makes it convergent with the national interest. In December 1997 Poland signed a protocol of scheduling the country’s accession to NATO and on March 12, it was formally admitted to the NATO.

These fundamental changes on the global level and the new political order of the Polish State determined new developments in the Polish policy at the regional level. In his parliamentary address on the 26th of April, 1990, K. Skubiszewski, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic declared Poland’s intention in relations with states on continents other than Europe. He pointed out, “we attach great importance to our relations with the Arab World”. Mr. Skubiszewski also assured the Arab countries that the resumption of relations with Israel in February 27, 1990, would not breach the interests of other states in the Middle East, particularly the interests of the Palestinians, and would not alter Polish stand of supporting the establishment of a lasting peace in the Middle East. Poland implemented immediately the UN Security Council decisions on Iraq in 1990. Our country stopped its exter-

nal trade with Iraq though the Polish companies and enterprises lost a substantial business worth 500 million of dollars. These losses came in a time, which was critical to Polish economic reform but as the Foreign Minister highlighted at the 45th Session of the UN General Assembly on September 24, 1990, “certain national and international values cannot be assessed by reference to measurable or calculate price”.¹ Such a position was appreciated very much in the world, and in particular, in the Arab Gulf area. As a result of these development diplomatic relations were established with the UAE (September, 1989), Qatar (October, 1989), and Oman (January, 1990) Bahrain (April, 1991), and Saudi Arabia (May, 1995).²

The Western approach to the Arab world

I have stressed this aspect of the foreign policy of my country as in the course of the recent developments in the Middle East called the Arab Spring there were talks about moral foundations of the policy of the West towards the Arab world. In particular, there were opinions that the U.S. and the European Union were carrying out the policy of the double-standards, that they kept silent about the brutal repression of unarmed civilian protesters in the Persian Gulf sheikhdoms, such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, while, by contrast, the vehemently pushed for conflict with Libya and Syria.³

The Western approach to the southern bank of the Mediterranean has been heavily criticized in the academic community and many opinions were expressed that this approach was both a policy and a moral failure. Embracing authoritarianism in the region has delivered a very precarious type of stability and has further undermined the credibility of the Union’s commitment to democracy and human rights in large parts of the Arab world. The political structures across the Middle East and North Africa have evolved through the interaction with the EU and other international pressures leading to a number of democratic institutions such as regular elections being adopted, but they have also been completely hollowed out by regimes that know full well that the Union was and still is unable to conceive of a regional stability that would see them departed. What we witnessed in the Arab world was an upgrading of authoritarianism.⁴

¹ “Address by K. Skubiszewski, Foreign Minister of the Republic of Poland, delivered at the 45th Session of the UN General Assembly”, New York, 24 September 1990, “ZO PISM” 1991, No. 3, pp. 79–81.

² “Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on the activities of the Polish Support Force on the Territory of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia”, Riyadh, 16 December 1990, “ZD PISM” 1991, No. 4, pp. 49–53.

³ F. Cavatorta, *The EU and the Arab World: Living up to the EU’s Normative Expectations*, “International Relations”, 17 February 2011, www.e-ir.info/?author=959.

⁴ H. Stewart, *Arabs Demand New Freedoms but the West Offers Old Economic Blueprint*, “Guardian”, 17 February 2011; www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jun/19/arab-spring-imf-world-bank-g8-egypt-tunisia.

The European Union has purposefully supported regimes with very little legitimacy, has not built solid links with genuinely popular opposition movements and forced drastic economic changes that might have been necessary, but that, when implemented by largely corrupt and illegitimate elites, proved to drive large sectors of the Arab population, particularly in the Maghreb, into further relative poverty.

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from these events and one mistake that must be avoided from the EU's perspective. First of all, the EU must live up to its normative foundations when interacting with other states. This does not mean adopting an overly confrontational attitude towards unpalatable regimes. Countries that are authoritarian and problematic must be engaged through diplomacy and commercial relations in order to be changed.

How Polish leaders reacted to the Arab Spring?

On 25th February 2011, President Komorowski expressed his opinion concerning dramatic events in the Middle East. President underlined that events in the Middle East took the Western world by surprise. He compared the ongoing protests in the Middle East to the events in Central and Eastern Europe at the turn of 1980s and 1990s. He also added that not many predicted that the Soviet Union would fall. At the same time, he indicated that Poland itself is the best example that the change of political system could be a peaceful process. "I'm glad that many European politicians resign from shaking hands with Kaddafi and looking at the Arabic world's problems only from 2 angles: economic interests connected with oil and gas and the fear of Arabic immigration to Europe."⁵

The position of Poland concerning Libya was stated clearly by Prime Minister Tusk on 18th March, 2011. He said, in his speech to the press in Polish parliament (the Sejm), that when it comes to the military conflict, Poland should present "reason and restraint." Polish Prime Minister declared the involvement of our country in Europe-wide humanitarian operation for the civilians and underlined that Poland will take into consideration its further involvement within the country's means. At the same time Prime Minister Tusk underlined that, together with President Komorowski, he has tried to "rationalize the involvement of Polish armed forces abroad," from the very beginning of their cooperation. "There have to be extraordinary circumstances present, directly or indirectly connected with our security or the situation which requires solidarity of the whole NATO, connected with alliance being endangered".⁶

On 19th March 2011 in Paris, during the international summit hosting representatives of the European Union, the UN, League of Arab States and the USA, Polish Prime Minister, as the only representative of Central Europe, announced

⁵ *Prezydent Komorowski o sytuacji w Libii i na Bliskim Wschodzie*, PAP, 25.02.2011.

⁶ *Tusk o Libii: Polska powinna zachować zdrowy rozsądek*, PAP, 18.03.2011.

that Poland would not be involved militarily in Libya. Poland supported the UN Resolution that “all necessary measures,” protecting civilians from the attacks of military forces faithful to their leader, had to be taken. In case of Libya, Polish Prime Minister said that there was no way that Polish interests or security was endangered. The same position, meaning not being militarily involved in Libya, was taken by German Chancellor, Angela Merkel.⁷

One should note, that in the recent period, among many opinion forming environments of Western Europe, Poland was indicated as the EU country the most predestined to coordinate the EU policy in the sphere of MENA region transformation. Similar signals also come from the Arab countries, where our model of transformation was of interest all the time, perceived as an effective within the sphere of political system reforms and guaranteeing internal stability.

The position of Polish government concerning military action in Libya was evaluated by the part of the Polish opposition as a sign of passiveness and isolationism. However, it seems that the decision was right and appropriate, taking into consideration military, logistic and economic capabilities of Poland. Leading rational policy should involve paying attention to the economic potential.

Three directions of the Polish policy towards the Arab Spring

One can indicate 3 main directions of the Polish policy towards the Middle East, connected with the so-called Arab Awakening or Arab Spring.

- 1) Strong reluctance towards military involvement in the matters of the region, accompanied by solidarity towards NATO political decisions.
- 2) Underlining the necessity of a peaceful political system transformation as possible and the most effective.
- 3) Solidarity with the pro-democratic forces in the Arab world and willingness to share Polish experience in changing into a democratic system.

Poland was especially active in promoting democracy in the Arab world. The Polish Minister for Foreign Affairs was the first in the EU who visited Libya after the fall of Muammar Kaddafi. Lech Wałęsa visited Tunisia and Egypt with the same goal. Since mid-year, when Poland took over EU presidency, Polish initiatives aimed at North Africa have gathered speed. Many Polish VIPs now take the flights to Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli. And the representatives of the Arab revolutionaries are being invited to Warsaw.⁸

Some have questioned the sincerity of the government’s sudden interest in Arab countries. “Polish foreign policy recently abounds with spectacular gestures

⁷ Donald Tusk: *Polska nie będzie uczestniczyć w akcji militarnej w Libii*, PAP, 19.03.2011; Tusk: *Polska nie zaangażuje się w militarne działania w Libii*, PAP, 25.03.2011.

⁸ G. Jones, G. Baczyńska, *Arab Spring. Leaders from the Former Eastern Bloc are Sharing their Experience of Revolution with Reformers in North Africa*, Reuters, June 2011.

aimed at establishing relations with the (North African) nations,” says the Zagranica Group, a platform for NGOs involved in international development cooperation. “In our opinion it serves more to promote Poland than to building a substantial dialogue. We expect from the government to initiate an open and transparent process of evaluation of the development needs of the new democracies, engage the representatives of the region, as well as Polish civil society.”⁹

Behind the glamorous façade of the media hype lies a more modest reality. The 2009 budget of Polish Aid, Poland’s development assistance vehicle, was \$350m – about 0.09% of GNI – and most of it was sucked in by the EU budget.¹⁰

Relatively little attention was paid to the developmental needs of the Arab world. There was very few publications on the social and especially economic needs of the Arab world.

In the optics of Polish politics, processes initiated in North Africa should be considered in few dimensions: role of Poland as one of the countries shaping UE politics; maintaining balance of the European policy of proximity; economic interests connected with the planned “Marshall Plan” for the MENA region, with the involvement of the oil countries’ capital; promotion of Polish transformation experiences.

What can be built in the future?

Polish foreign policy is based on strong fundamentals of respecting human rights and high moral values. There’s no doubt about that. In the last months Poland was very active in promoting democracy in the Middle East. Many Polish officials, including ministers, and former Solidarity movement activists visited Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. However, the following question arises: what can be built on that fundament in the context of Arab Spring?

It is visible that MENA territory is underappreciated when it comes to our interests, also economic, as well as social potential of changes in specific Arab and Muslim countries. Our relations with that region, in comparison to the relations of representative European countries with that area, are in general limited. The economic cooperation, basically boils down to trade exchange on a small scale – in 2010 a turnover with 5 North African countries reached only 804 mln euro, including export – 530 mln. Bounding temporary matters with long-term interests in that area, connected with Polish, also economic presence in Arab countries, is slight.

What are the possibilities of further cooperation in the context of Arab Spring?

⁹ R. Stefanicki, *Poland Steps Into Arab Spring*, Inter Press Service, 11.07.2011, www.ip-snews.net/news.asp?idnews=105746.

¹⁰ *Poland’s Foreign Policy. For Our Freedom and Yours*, “The Economist”, 7 July 2011, www.economist.com/blogs/easternapproaches/2011/07/polands-foreign-policy.

I have heard many times that cooperation with the Middle East is a series of unfulfilled expectations and disappointments, that the cooperation could have been more resilient, that we could have achieved more. I think that one should have their feet firmly on the ground and always match our expectations to our possibilities. A starting point should be economic potential of Poland, a phase of its own transformation, balancing pros and expenditures and the fact of being a member of EU and UN. Poland is a country of average size and average economic potential and it is still in the phase of a serious economic transformation, especially when it comes to infrastructure. It has to cope with unemployment and face the challenges concerning healthcare reform and pension funds. Our economy is tightly connected with the EU countries, especially with Germany, and what is important, our residents are mentally fixed on the countries of the EU, not those of the Middle East. That is why it is difficult to expect any breakthrough in Polish-Middle Eastern relations.

A very important field of cooperation, might be changing the mindset of Poles and residents of the EU, concerning the mentality of the Arab world. The Arab Spring showed, that in the Middle East in the last few decades, not only a new generation has arisen but also a new middle class, which signalizes their willingness to take over the political scene and which thinks that paternalistic authoritarianism should be history. The essence of Arab Spring was the fact that many leaders of Arab world did not see that change coming. They did not notice that as a result of economic liberalization a new middle class has appeared.

The next field of cooperation which depends on us and does not need substantial investments is education. I think that there is a wide space for cooperation between universities, research centers and institutes. Arabic universities have not been included into Erasmus program; there very few joint degree programs between universities in Arab countries and the EU universities and there is no such a program between any Arab university and any university in Poland. There is recently a wave of projects on the Arab Spring submitting to various European institutions for funding but very few research centers in the Arab world are included into these projects.