The Polish Presidency and the Future of the European Union

By Paweł Piotr Styrna | April 25, 2012

As Barroso and Tusk smile the Euro-federalists are utilizing the Eurozone crisis to legitimize a power grab

The Republic of Poland presided over the Council of the European Union from July 1 – December 31, 2011, after which it passed the torch to the Kingdom of Denmark. The Presidency was a lackluster one, eclipsed by the intervention in Libya and the Eurozone crisis. Poland’s Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, himself conceded in December 2011: “We wanted more, but the circumstances conspired against us, and we did not achieve much during the Polish Presidency.”

Tusk’s reluctant admission stemmed from the simple fact that Warsaw failed to accomplish its stated goals on several important issues. Contrary to the Presidency’s agenda, accession negotiations with Turkey were not accelerated. The summit of the Polish-sponsored and Swedish-supported Eastern Partnership – which took place in Warsaw on September 29 – 30, 2011 – bore little fruit, as the Belarusians boycotted the summit and Western Europeans demonstrated a lack of interest. The Tusk government also proved unable to secure its objective of greater cooperation within the EU on matters of military, security, and energy policies. While European federalists desire a continental military-security arrangement in opposition to the United States and NATO, some of the key EU players (Germany, France, and Italy) prefer to appease post-Soviet Russia. From their perspective, the uninterrupted flow of Russian natural gas and oil – in addition to access to the country’s large market (which includes the sales of state-of-the-art weaponry, such as Mistral ships, to Moscow) – trumps the security of Central and Eastern Europe, betraying a serious lack of EU cohesion.
Among its successes Poland lists: the finalizing of the EU Association and Free Trade Agreement with Ukraine (initialed on March 30, 2012); the decision of Croatian voters to join the Union (in a January 22, 2012 referendum); as well as the passage of the 2012 EU budget and the so-called economic governance “six pack.”

Yet, these achievements are in and of themselves open to debate. Is continued EU expansion in the best interest of its members – both new and old – including potential candidates? The Eurozone crisis has laid bare the Union’s difficulties of keeping its own house in order, although this has failed to significantly temper the zeal of European federalists seeking deeper integration and continued enlargement. The “six pack” also raises serious problems. It is certainly true that deficit spending contributed greatly to Europe’s fiscal woes. Even so, the fact that the “six pack” grants the European Commission the right to fine countries which spend beyond their means imperils their sovereignty and further deepens the bureaucratic EU’s deficit of democracy. The Europhoric PM Tusk and his foreign minister, Radek Sikorski – who continued to call for “more Europe” as the chief solution to the Union’s problems – did not appear particularly concerned about this threat, however.

The Tusk government’s main adversary, the right-of-center and anti-communist Law and Justice Party (headed by Jarosław Kaczyński, Poland’s PM in 2006 -2007, and the twin brother of Poland’s late President, Lech Kaczyński) subjected the Presidency to intense scrutiny and criticism. In an exclusive commentary for SFPPR News & Analysis, Poland’s former foreign minister in the Kaczyński cabinet, and current vice president of the Alliance of European Conservatives and Reformists, Anna Fotyga, provided specific examples:

From the Polish point of view, it was a grave failure to exclude from the Presidency’s priorities the legislation concerning a common agricultural policy. During the Polish Presidency, the [European] Commission and the Council began to reform it nevertheless, but behind closed doors (…), and the initial fruits of these labors are unfavorable to Poland (…).

During the Presidency, Poland also promoted very vague integration in the realm of fiscal policy. (…) These actions violate the Polish constitution, which states that taxes fall completely within the competence of the national government. (…)

Through a series of EU executive acts (…) rapid and deep integration occurred in a department of crucial significance for the sovereignty of the state, i.e. internal affairs. (…) asylum policies were standardized. (…)

A great breakthrough – albeit one unfavorable to Poland, in my view – occurred in the matter of coordinating the positions of EU countries vis-à-vis NATO. This is devoid of political and international-legal logic. Some EU states are not NATO members, and they differ in their perceptions of external threats. (…)
The only realm in which the Polish Presidency was extremely successful and active was a rapprochement between the EU and Russia, with great benefits for the latter, and no benefits, whatsoever, for Poland. I will go even farther – with great danger for Poland. The insignificant population movement across Poland’s border with [Russia’s] Kaliningrad District – in spite of the enclave’s militarization [e.g. the deployment of the S-400 “Triumf” surface-to-air missile system adjacent to the border of Poland-EU-NATO in April 2012], as well as criminal and sanitary threats [one of the highest AIDS rates in Russia] – failed to improve relations in meaningful matters, such as Russia’s [clearly biased] investigation of the Smolensk Plane Crash.

An entire array of EU documents was passed which tie economic policy to environmental issues. These include such EU “flagship” initiatives as the horizontal program for sustainable economies (…) which may in the future hamper the exploitation of Poland’s shale gas reserves.

In January 2012, Minister Fotyga also argued that the Tusk government’s signing of the EU Fiscal Compact has unnecessarily obligated Poland to enter the Eurozone and further bolstered Germany’s domination in the Union. Currently, only the UK and the Czech Republic have eschewed signing the Compact, which they view as imperiling their economic and political independence.

In general, Poland’s Presidency has zealously reflected the foreign policy of the post-communist liberal coalition government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk and his foreign minister, Radek Sikorski. Historian Marek Jan Chodakiewicz has described it (in a January 25, 2012 interview) as:

A policy of depressed realism (…). Generally, this line appears capitulationist and can be summed up thus: ‘We are small and weak, ergo we cannot do anything by ourselves, neither at home, nor abroad. Let us then attach ourselves to a sponsor, or maybe several, and let’s live in harmony with everybody in the sense that we should try to be conciliatory.’

Accordingly, the Tusk cabinet fell politely in line, striving to satisfy Brussels and the continental “concert of powers” – Germany, France, and Russia. None of the “boat rocking” of the Kaczyński years could be allowed to repeat itself. Warsaw’s Europhoric Presidency thus dovetailed with the Euro-federalists’ attempt to salvage the Euro and, by extension, the EU in its current bureaucratic, centralizing, and socialist form. These Stakhanovite efforts, way beyond production norms, have further revealed the unambiguously political objective of the Euro, exposing the currency union’s purpose as a vehicle paving the way toward a pan-European super-state. It seems that the federalists have taken their cue from the nineteenth-century Zollverein (German Customs Union) – based on limiting trade barriers within, but maintaining protectionism vis-à-vis outsiders, in addition to a common currency (Thaler) - which prepared
the ground for the eventual unification of Germany under Prussia’s hegemony. Of course the current financial woes of bloated Euro-socialist welfare states were not particularly difficult to predict, confirming Margaret Thatcher’s famous quip that “the trouble with socialism is that you eventually run out of other people’s money.” Now, as the depth of that bankruptcy menacingly stares Europe directly into its, heretofore, complacent face, the Euro-federalists have apparently decided that allowing a good crisis to go to waste would be a great shame. Hence, the European debt crisis was spun to legitimize a power grab by Brussels.

Given this context, where is the EU headed?

EU-skepticism is on the rise throughout Europe, even if some of this discontent is driven primarily by populist and socialist anxieties, and only secondarily by concerns for national sovereignty. For instance, François Hollande, the Socialist Party’s frontrunner in France’s upcoming presidential election – while not an opponent of the European Project, has attacked the “Merkozy” fiscal consensus and called for a European “New Deal.” Apparently, for Monsieur Hollande, and his ideological counterparts throughout the continent, the EU is simply not socialist enough. Meanwhile, even in Germany, the core and main financial sponsor of EU integration, public opinion polls have shown that more than half of the German population wishes to scrap the Euro and restore the Deutsch Mark. They also oppose bailing out bankrupt Eurozone members, such as Greece.

Ireland’s upcoming referendum on the ratification of the Fiscal Compact, set to take place on May 31, may be a watershed in this regard, irrespective of how the Irish ultimately vote. While supporters are leading in opinion polls, a victory of the “yes” option is by no means guaranteed, for the supports of the Lisbon Treaty in 2008, which was rejected by Irish citizens, enjoyed an even greater lead. A “yes” to the Fiscal Compact would likely build up momentum for ratification throughout Europe (the “snowball” effect), but this is not certain. A “no,” as in the case of the first Lisbon referendum, would undoubtedly provoke the ire of Brussels, which would, in all probability, attempt to compel the Irish to vote again – until the desired results are achieved!

After all, the European Commission has not shied away from blackmail and other coercive means to compel member states to fall in line. A case in point is Hungary, whose conservative and anti-communist prime minister, Viktor Orban, has sought to decommunize his country, while embracing a Christian and patriotic program. Whereas, the Euro-federalists fought to exclude any invocations of God or Europe’s Christian heritage from a proposed EU constitution, the Magyar leader has done the exact opposite by specifically inserting Hungary’s Catholic legacy into the Danubian state’s new constitution. His efforts to limit the power of the central bank and to curb the post-communist good-old-boy network have been viewed as assaults on “democracy” by the unelected bureaucrats in Brussels, who have threatened to block an IMF
loan Hungary badly needs to stabilize her finances … unless Orban reverses policies the EC considers unpalatable.

Such interference in the affairs of sovereign, democratic states – particularly in the defense of post-totalitarian patronage networks – should be a cause for great concern; as should the clearly demonstrated zeal the Euro-federalists have displayed in pursuing an ideological project of European super-state – apparently against all odds – and their ill-disguised, patronizing contempt for the popular will, whenever it turns toward EU-skepticism. The federalists’ efforts to subvert Europe’s sovereign states and national identities, in the hope of molding a “European” identity, also echo to a disturbing degree the “Europe a Nation” vision of Sir Oswald Mosley, the head of the British Union of Fascists. Some observers, such as the Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky, have even recalled the empire of Lenin and Stalin: “like the Soviet Union, the European Union has within itself the seeds of its own demise. Unfortunately when it collapses, and it will, it will leave immense destruction behind, and we will be left with huge economic and ethnic problems.”

From a global perspective, European anti-Americanism coupled with cozy relations with post-Soviet Russia, a resurgent and aggressive power, suggests that a more federalized Europe led by the “Old European” core would continue to find common ground in undermining the Atlanticist order. For Washington and London, a Moscow-Brussels axis stretching from Vladivostok to Lisbon constitutes a geopolitical nightmare. It may, however, be preempted or checked by supporting forces displaying a healthy distrust of deepening European integration throughout Europe, and by simultaneously backing more pro-Atlanticist actors, such as the states of the Intermarium region – the lands between the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas – such as the Baltics, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Hungary, and the Czech Republic (residual post-communist pathologies notwithstanding). However, identifying the solutions to these problems is contingent upon freeing ourselves from some orthodoxies to which foreign policy establishments – both in the U.S. and Europe – remain passionately wedded. The necessity and indispensability of the European Union, as we know it, is one of these.

Note: For background information on Poland and the EU, it may be helpful to read this article in conjunction with my article written on the eve of the Polish Presidency. See Pawel Piotr Styrna, “Poland Assumes the EU Presidency: Ceding Sovereignty After Soviet Dependence,” SFPPR News & Analysis, July 19, 2011.

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