

Poland and the Europeanization in the West Balkans

One of the consequences of the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the necessity to create a comprehensive European Union policy towards this part of the continent. The EU policy took the form of a complete package of actions towards the so called West Balkans, the countries created after the dissolution of Yugoslavia (apart from Slovenia) and Albania. The EU strategy covers specific instruments of interaction, including the prospect of accession. The possible membership was widely considered to be a strong stimulating factor for the West Balkan countries to perform political, economic and social reforms, as well as to initiate regional cooperation and implement EU standards. In order to support the political and economic transformations in the West Balkans, the European Union strived to stabilize the political and economic situation and create appropriate conditions for the coexistence of the Balkan nations.

While analyzing the development of the EU initiatives in the West Balkans, as well as the factors determining the formation of the policy towards the region, it is important to consider the role and position of Poland in the process of the Europeanization of the West Balkans, in this case understood as ad extra type Europeanization (from the European institutions towards the entities from outside the EU).

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When accessing the EU, Poland gained the opportunity to take part not only in the processes occurring within the Union, but also in the mechanisms for the transfer of values, standards, ideas and integration logic outside the borders of the EU. It is worth pointing out, however, that the position of Poland towards the EU policy related to the West Balkans was derived from the role and place of the region in the Polish foreign policy. The West Balkans for years have been outside the Polish interest because of the lack of any geopolitical, historical or economic connections. While concentrating efforts related to strategic foreign policy priorities and directions, the Polish diplomacy decreased its activity in other areas. The fact that the West Balkans were considered peripheral did not mean that this area of Europe was completely marginalized in the Polish foreign policy after 1989. This can be proved by the Polish participation in numerous initiatives undertaken by different countries, international organizations and structures for regional cooperation in order to improve safety and stability of this region, which was constantly shaken by ethnic conflicts. The forms and scope of Poland's engagement depended on the available resources and defined priorities of the Polish foreign policy and were subordinate to their completion. Poland did not aspire to develop a more active policy in the Balkans. The dominant role was played by the western superpowers, Russia and the international organizations able to shape political, military and economic reality. Poland only participated in the projects initiated by other entities and the scope of our activity has been very limited for years.

The nature of the Polish policy towards the West Balkans did not change when the strategic foreign policy goals, the membership in NATO and the European Union, were reached. The region was not defined as a foreign policy priority and still remains on its margins. Even though Poland declares the willingness to intensify bilateral relations, emphasizes the support for the processes of modernization and democratization in the West Balkans and supports the euroatlantic aspirations of the region, its attention and activity are focused on other areas. Such conclusions can be drawn from the analysis of the actions of the Polish diplomacy in the context of bilateral relations with the countries of the region and the activity within the EU. The relationship of Poland with the countries of the region is not intensive, neither in the political nor economic dimension. Because of the European policy priorities, the activity of Poland within the European Union for the benefit of the West Balkans is limited. Striving to achieve the goals relevant from the point of view of Poland, related to the integration of the Eastern Partnership program, it concentrates its activity on the area of Eastern Europe. Despite that, it also tries to participate in creating the EU policy, even more so because the West Balkans constitute an important challenge for the EU and requires constant attention as well as political and economic engagement.



The participation of Poland in the process of integrating the West Balkan countries into the European Union is a consequence of considering the political and economic stability of the area to be crucial for European safety. Within this area, despite the passage of time, there are still potential flash points. The lack of stability determines the actions of the European Union, which tries to achieve peace and security by inspiring the countries of the region to take different actions, which may help them become a member of the organization in the future. Poland is a part of the EU strategy for the region and participates in the projects aimed at the Balkans. For instance, it participates in the so called twinning programs, funded from the IPA pre-accession aid. They are aimed, for example, at preparing the administration of the Balkan countries aspiring to join the EU for the implementation of the EU legislation and familiarizing it with specific procedures and negotiations or organizing trainings for the Kosovo Border Police. It is worth emphasizing, however, that the lack of clearly defined political and economic interests in the region cause Poland to resign from its role as a creator of the EU policy towards the West Balkans. It does not mean withdrawing from this aspect of the EU policy altogether. Our participation differs significantly from the engagement of other countries, but our diplomacy declares the readiness to participate in the support mechanisms for the West Balkans.

The support for the accession of the West Balkans to the European Union is based on many premises. First of all, Poland for years has been building its image of a country concerned with international security, inspiring others to democratize public life, build civic society, reform administrative structures and create local governments. It is a chance for Poland to present itself as a country which is involved in the activities of the international community, which initiates actions and is ready to take responsibility for European matters. The experience of socio-political changes in Poland serves as a capital used by the Polish diplomacy, just like the process of the implementation of the integration requirements and the successful accession negotiations with the European Union. Poland encourages the countries of the region to similar undertakings by offering the help of experts, experience and support of integration aspirations on the forum of the EU institutions. Secondly, Poland, as a country which went through a long process of political and economic transformation and consistently realized strategic goals of its foreign policy, supports similar attempts made by other countries, including those from the south-east region of Europe. Thirdly, the accession of the Balkan countries to the EU means, that the zone of safety and stability will be extended to an area which has been torn by conflicts and crises for years. This will contribute to an increase in the security of the whole Europe. If the Balkans remained outside the European Union, they could become a source of tension and unrest in the future. The marginalization of that region would also lead to economic degradation and political



destabilization. This would inevitably lead to another conflict in Europe. Fourthly, it may be assumed that the accession of the West Balkans to the European Union will help finalize another enlargement, this time by the eastern neighborhood, which is so important from the point of view of the Polish foreign policy.

The Polish presidency in the Council of the European Union was an important experience for Poland and, at the same time, an opportunity to intensify the Polish activity towards the West Balkans. The duties and responsibilities related to the presidency caused an expansion of interests to the areas important for the EU as a whole. The accession of the West Balkan countries to the EU is one of these areas. The increased involvement of Poland was visible both before and during its presidency. Attempts to dynamize the Polish policy were made. This may be exemplified by a sort of diplomatic offensive in Poland. Poland, as a country preparing to lead the Council of the European Union, proposed its own ideas related to performing this function and emphasized the problems which were to be the center of the EU attention during its presidency. Taking into consideration the formal and legal competences of a country leading the Council, the willingness to support the integration attempts of the Balkan countries was declared. In November 2010, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Radosław Sikorski, visited the West Balkans. During the meetings in Serbia and Macedonia he encouraged both of these countries to continue political and economic reforms, as well as to implement EU procedures, which might enable the integration into the EU structures in the future. He promised active and ambitious actions on the part of Poland during its presidency, which considered the integration of the West Balkans to be one of its priorities. Similar words were spoken by Prime Minister Donald Tusk six months later in Montenegro, Serbia and Croatia during his visit just before the inauguration of the Polish presidency. At that time, he stated that the enlargement of the European Union was one of the most important goals of the Polish presidency.

The increase in the Polish activity towards the West Balkans was a result of, among others, their role in the foreign policy and enlargement strategy of the European Union, as well as the place of the region among the priorities of the Hungarian presidency, preceding the Polish leadership in the Council of the European Union, which determined the goals and priorities of the Polish presidency. In its program, the importance attached by Poland to the enlargement of the EU was clearly emphasized. It was stated, that it is both for the benefit of the Union itself, as well as the countries applying for accession. Since every Balkan country was at a different stage of the integration process (some were candidates, some potential candidates), Poland offered different types of support depending on the stage and needs. The process of enlargement could potentially improve the European stability and the international position of the EU, expand the area of prosperity, common standards and



values. This is why Poland decided to continue and strengthen the process. The successful accession negotiations of Croatia from the second half of 2011 might have been an impulse to intensify the actions aimed at the integration of the West Balkans with the EU. During the Polish presidency, a Treaty of Accession was signed with Croatia on 9 December 2011. However, another Polish goal in the context of the integration of the West Balkans, granting Serbia the status of a candidate to the EU, was not achieved. Despite the favorable opinion of the European Commission from October 2011, which recognized as sufficient and satisfying the improvements made by Serbia in the implementation of political, economic and legal criteria, recommending Serbia for a candidate, the goal was not reached. Because of the lack of unanimity among the member states, the decision concerning Serbia was postponed until the country manages to fulfill all the conditions. It was the agreement between Serbia and Kosovo from February 2012, concerning regional cooperation and common border management under the auspices of the European Commission, which paved the way for changing the status of Serbia.

The Polish presidency supported the integration of other West Balkan countries as well. It was emphasized, that the integration process is a strong stimulus for reconciliation and creating good relations in the West Balkans, as well as the implementation of reforms in the aspiring and candidate countries. However, further enlargement depends not only on the efforts of these countries in fulfilling the membership criteria, but also on the determination of the Union in continuing its enlargement strategy. In the context of the economic crisis, the chances for further enlargement are rather slim. However, the European Union will soon have to answer whether it is ready for enlargement and when it will take place. The countries of the Balkan region, or at least some of them, will fulfill the requirements sooner or later. It is difficult to imagine the EU formulating more strict criteria, not giving any real chances for membership in return. The EU politicians are aware of the dangers related to the escalation of requirements towards the Balkan countries and disregarding the improvements they make in their implementation. The enthusiasm for modernization and accession, which is today visible in some countries of the region, could be quickly substituted by disbelief in the sense of following the rigorous requirements if it does not result in any clear declarations of possible accession on the part of the European Union. In the meantime, the skepticism towards the accession of countries that will constitute a burden in the future is growing within the EU itself. The argument concerning the necessity for enlargement to ensure the security and stability in South-East Europe may not be enough. It only seems right for the EU to clearly define the conditions for membership and follow them rigorously. The perspective of accession should be clear once the conditions are met by the countries of the region. The accession of Croatia should serve as an encouragement for the remaining countries.



Conclusions

The role of Poland in the process of the Europeanization of the West Balkans and its influence on the pace of this process was and still is fairly limited. It mainly consists in political declarations of willingness for cooperation and sharing experience, support for the actions taken on the forum of the European Union and different structures and organizations for regional cooperation. Our political role in the Balkans, as well as our level of engagement in economic reconstruction, differ significantly from other member states of the European Union. The participation of the Polish troops, policemen and border guards in peacekeeping and stabilizing activities or humanitarian and foreign aid do not constitute a sufficient justification for the claim, that Poland plays an active role in the region.

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