

Poland and the EU in 2035

Scenario report on the second European Future Summit 2017

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Workshop participants:

George Berezkin, Ricardo Borges de Castro, Anna-Lena Kirch, Agnieszka Kłos, Kai-Olaf Lang, Emilie Mansfeld, Wolfram Meyer zu Uptrup, Arthur Molt, Milan Nič, Kateryna Pryshchepa, Rafał Riedel, Maria Skóra, Aleksandra Spalińska, Denis Suarsana, Jerzy Szczęsny, Wojciech Szymański, Silke Wojcik, Kamil Zajączkowski

Workshop implementation:

Samuel F. Müller, European Academy Berlin and Anna Visvizi, Institute of East-Central Europe

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Tectonic shifts ahead? Three scenarios on Poland and the EU

Summarising key outcomes emerging from an expert workshop entitled 'Poland and the EU in 2035', this paper does indeed convey the serious concerns of many workshop participants over the current state of relations between Poland and the EU. Major themes which were debated during the workshop include the national-conservative political course of the current Polish government and its critical stance towards common EU policies.

One focal point in this debate was the controversy between the Polish government and the European Commission. In response to Polish judicial reforms, the latter triggered Article 7 TEU, as it sees a 'clear risk of a serious breach of the rule of law in Poland',¹ with potentially dire consequences, including suspension of Poland's voting rights in the Council. The debate went hand in hand with discussing the future outlook of the EU in general. The bottom line in this debate was that the EU is in the process of becoming a much more fluid and tentative, a much less united and cohesive union, experiencing major shifts in its modus of integration.

In consequence, the crosscutting issue for all three scenarios debated during the meeting is Poland's possible future distance from the EU. In terms of a general trend, the three scenarios hence display 'shades' of Poland distancing itself from the EU, including corresponding conclusions regarding the future shape of the EU itself. The scenarios may be summarised as follows.

Scenario 1 – Poland takes the 'U-turn'

This trend is especially visible in the first scenario, which theorises on continuous withdrawing by Poland from common policies, joint political strategies, as well as from legal and normative frameworks at European level. Against this background, it raises the question of whether it may be deemed plausible that Poland might even eventually exit the EU within the viewed timeframe of approximately 20 years.

In view of its narrative, the first scenario posits that Poland might successively lessen its commitment to several common EU policy initiatives and legal frameworks, including the Single Market, triggering a number of legal responses by the European institutions. This development might unfold as a painstaking step-by-step process in which penal procedures issued by Brussels take years to be executed and are frequently blocked by other EU members, while the Polish government ignores the terms stated by the EU and successfully exploits each step of this process in the domestic context.

As the most crucial driver in this scenario, Poland's distancing itself from the EU is conditioned by far-reaching national-conservatism in Poland, with the country striving for a higher degree of national autonomy, hand in hand with the transformation of Polish institutional structuring. Furthermore, this scenario assumes continued emergence of a 'multi-speed' Europe, though with the exception of Poland which eventually finds itself isolated from most other EU countries.

Scenario 2 – Poland takes the 'EU-turn'

The second scenario takes the opposite view. According to this scenario, up to and including 2035, Poland is increasingly committed to several mechanisms of European integration. Over time, it turns into an integrative power especially in central and eastern Europe, balancing interests and relations between eastern and western EU countries and playing an important role in the EU enlargement process.

As crucial drivers in this narrative, it was argued that Poland might find a new voice in the EU in the wake of the Brexit negotiations, gradually rediscovering common ground with other powerful European countries including Germany and France. Moreover, in view of Polish domestic affairs, this scenario

¹ European Commission, 'Rule of Law: European Commission acts to defend judicial independence in Poland,' *European Commission – Press release*, Dec. 20, 2017, online. URL: <http://bit.ly/2CMzjNh>.

posits step-wise transformation of national-conservatism into liberal-conservatism. This trend might be driven by increasing concerns among a growing number of Poles that Poland might drift too far into political as well as economic isolation, a trend which would manifest itself in election victories by less EU-sceptical political forces.

With regard to the EU, the scenario also posits continuous emergence of a 'multi-speed' Europe. However, as this scenario has it, the EU changes its political course more clearly from sanctions to incentives when member countries refuse to cooperate on a deeper level, while adopting a more flexible legal framework, making it easier to opt in or out of a given policy.

Scenario 3 – Poland takes the 'East-turn'

The third scenario posits again another modus of disintegration, namely, a widening gap between western and eastern European states. It debates whether it might be plausible to assume that Poland establishes closer ties to several central and eastern European countries and, up to and including 2035, turns into an important player in various regional alliances, including the 16+1 forum.²

As was debated in the first scenario, the narrative of the third scenario posits a step-wise process in which Poland and the EU are drifting apart. However, other than in the first scenario, it theorises the possibility of Poland establishing closer ties to China, especially through deepened trade relations and new trade partnerships. However, as this scenario further discusses, it remains highly questionable whether such a development would actually serve Poland's interests in the long run, as the country might increasingly depend on trade with China and thus come under increased Chinese influence as well as the influence of other super powers.

Moreover, in this scenario, such considerations have been placed within an emergent 'variable geometry' Europe, which was debated as a negative outcome. As this scenario has it, against the background of continuing severe deficits in cooperation at EU level regarding a large number of issues, EU membership structure has become more and more differentiated. In particular, policies geared towards the eastern neighbourhood have lost coherence, while sub-regional alliances in eastern and south-eastern Europe tend to replace EU cooperation frameworks, even if such alliances turn out to be generally unstable and fluid in nature.

What to take from this report?

Indeed, this outline represents only a small portion of the conclusions and findings of the workshop and its various debates. It does not substitute for an elaborate analysis and demands further research on a much deeper level. Still, the scenarios as outlined point to key problems, which might provide a productive starting point for subsequent controversies.

To begin with, when looking at Poland today, if mainly indirectly, this paper highlights the tremendous success of the present Polish government. With its national-conservative political course – including its closed-doors policies, its welfare policies, its claim to the country's cultural heritage and its profound EU-scepticism – Poland's governing party is likely to continue to gather mass support. Even though the second scenario discusses the possibility of gradual transformation of national-conservatism in Poland

² 16+1 refers to a trade forum of 16 central and eastern European countries and China. The last summit was held in Hungary. According to CEEC 2017, when announcing the 2017 summit, "The idea of a cooperation platform between Central and Eastern European Countries (CEEC) and China –referred to briefly as 16+1 – was conceived after the first China-Central and Eastern European Countries Economic and Trade Forum held in Budapest in 2011. Members of the format include China, 11 EU member states (Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and 5 non-EU countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia)", CEEC, 6th Summit of Heads of Government of Central and Eastern European Countries and China, *CHINA-CEEC 2017 Budapest Hungary*, CEEC, 2017, online. URL: <http://bit.ly/2DIPQkZ>.

and normalisation of relations between Warsaw and Brussels, none of the three scenarios considers it plausible that Poland will quickly break away from its current political path.

This finding picks up on the general trend of mounting EU-scepticism, hand in hand with a rise in national-conservative political currents and parties within many EU countries. In view of this trend, as is especially true for the first scenario, a problematic aspect lies in the fact that supposedly exclusive notions of national culture, historical heritage, local customs and traditions, religion and at times even ethnic origin have once more gained massive weight in today's political discourse in Poland and beyond. Closely connected to this issue, the debate during the workshop took issue with the often emotional and, in fact, aggravated character of today's public controversies. In turn, it appears appropriate to conclude that it can by no means be taken as given that future generations of Europeans will a priori consent to the normative fundamentals and basic legal frameworks in the EU, which seem to have lost their universal appeal.

In view of a changing EU, such trends correspond with an argument which is part and parcel of all three scenarios, i.e. that European integration will develop in much more flexible modes than in the past. The question which all three scenarios imply is, thus, how 'differentiated integration' in the EU – including varying sub-categories, such as 'variable geometry', 'multi-speed' or 'à la carte' Europe³ – might work as a productive framework for European integration, instead of merely indicating varying modes of European disintegration.

Yet, in the light of the three scenarios, a productive and forward-looking form of European integration is not so much an option as it is a necessity. All three scenarios also make it clear that there is no viable alternative to the EU, at least not throughout the chosen timeframe. Hence, in order to flourish economically and grant peace and security to its people, any European country will have to commit to the EU, i.e. engage in its institutions and its legal procedures, and cooperate with all other EU member states. This remains true when taking inner European challenges into consideration as well as when looking beyond Europe, considering global challenges and constellations.

³ European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Differentiated integration in the European Union,' by Aidan Christie and Giulio Sabbat, *At a glance* [online publication by the European Parliament], Feb. 2016. URL: <http://bit.ly/1Oq9MRq>

Background & acknowledgements

This report summarises key outcomes emerging from an expert workshop entitled ‘Poland and the EU in 2035’. The workshop took place in Berlin in September 2017, bringing together an interdisciplinary panel of experts from Poland and Germany who kindly agreed to engage in an open and innovative debate on the future of Poland and the EU.

The workshop was part of the project entitled ‘European future summits 2017 – Social cohesion and transnational security in Europe – a scenario workshop series on the future of Greece, Poland and Bulgaria’. The project was conducted by the European Academy Berlin with kind support from the Federal Foreign Office. Furthermore, the present workshop was realised in cooperation with the Institute of East-Central Europe (IESW), through the kind additional assistance of which allowed a number of Polish participants to attend the workshop in Berlin. We are indebted to all those mentioned above, to whom we wish to express our deepest gratitude.

Objectives & method

Similar to previous scenario reports of the European Academy Berlin,⁴ this paper emerges from a scenario workshop which was conducted along the lines of the ‘alternate futures’ approach by Michael Oppenheimer.⁵ The overarching objective of this approach is to develop three alternate future scenarios or future narratives, indicating three different pathways of how the future of a given country or issue might possibly evolve. Thus, each scenario is meant to posit a distinct future trend and show how this trend might play out in practice.

Based on an open dialogue among multiple parties, this endeavour does not aim at an exhaustive analysis, nor to determine the most likely future of a given country or issue. Instead, it aims to provide a concise line of reasoning, making plausible assumptions regarding possible future events and developments. By that means, also, surprising turns and unexpected outcomes might come into focus.

The workshop in question concentrated on several pressing issues facing Poland, hand in hand with debating equally pressing challenges ahead for the EU. By reflecting on this debate, this paper wishes to provide new impulses, contributing to a rich and productive debate on the future of Poland and the EU.

Authorship

As this document aims to give a voice to all workshop participants and further interlocutors involved in the process, developing it included the difficult task of giving room to varied and at times even opposing arguments and views. For this reason, those individuals mentioned here have agreed to take responsibility for what is said here only to the extent that the paper documents a controversial debate to which they contributed. Hence, the paper reflects neither a common position nor the distinct viewpoint of any one of the contributors and organisations mentioned. Instead, it is a record of a widely ramified and vivid discussion, presented here in the form of three future scenarios with the objective of igniting an even more thorough-going debate.

4 Samuel F. Mueller, Lisa Hohneck (ed.), ‘The United Kingdom and the EU in 2030: Scenario report of the first European Future Summit of the European Academy of Berlin’, European Academy Berlin, Mar. 2017, online. URL: <http://bit.ly/2yja8Ou>; Samuel F. Mueller (ed.), ‘Greece and the EU in 2035: Scenario report on the first European Future Summit 2017 in the European Academy Berlin’, European Academy Berlin, Dec. 2017, online. URL: <http://bit.ly/2rYGxql>.

5 Michael F. Oppenheimer, *Pivotal Countries, Alternate Futures: Using Scenarios to Manage American Strategy*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

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Bus M19 Taubertstraße station
Bus 186 Hagenplatz station
S-Bahn line 7 Grunewald station

Europäische Akademie Berlin e. V.
 Bismarckallee 46/48
 D-14193 Berlin
 Phone: +49 30 89 59 51 0
 Fax: +49 30 89 59 51 95
www.eab-berlin.eu/en/

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