International Challenges for Regional Security in Central and Eastern Europe – Poland, the EU and Protracted Conflicts

Paweł Świeżak
Department of Strategic Analyses,
National Security Bureau.

Transformation in Central Europe proceeded differently from the changes that took place in the Eastern part of the continent. Poland's policy aims at promoting security and stability in Europe and opposes the creation of new dividing lines. Promoting democratization within the neighborhood is an important element of that approach. As a leader of the EU's Eastern policy, Poland is convinced that the cooperation with Ukraine is crucial for achieving the aim of stability and predictability on the continent. Special focus should be placed on protracted conflicts in the region.
The global economic crisis sharpens and accelerates tendencies that influence the international environment. Still, it can be seen not only as a threat, but also as a chance for "new openings" and for introducing new ideas in the security sphere. The current situation requires an active approach from the EU which shall review the tools used in the neighborhood area.

Central and Eastern Europe – two different stories?

After the collapse of the bipolar system one could fear that Central and Eastern Europe would slide into chaos and instability – just as it happened in the case of the Balkans. Several issues were called into question such as the sustainability of borders (those created half a century earlier, often as a result of external intervention), the situation of ethnic minorities, the reliability of newly created state structures, the burdened relations with the neighbours (some conflicts have been frozen for half a century). Last but not least, one could doubt whether those inexperienced democratic systems were able to build effective market economies.

Looking for the answers to these issues, most countries of the region decided to embark on the path of European and Euro-Atlantic integration. Successive waves of the EU enlargement (2004, 2007) and the enlargement

of NATO (1999, 2004), along with requirements imposed by those organizations, became the stimulus for deep political and irreversible economic reforms. The agenda of reform has worked to stabilize relations between the countries of the region. Also favorable international environment was conducive to the success of transformation process in Central Europe. Among the most important external factors one can point to the long period of economic prosperity, the policy of the Western states that was aimed at overcoming the Cold War divisions, and the relative weakness of countries which were traditionally skeptical of spreading the transatlantic values.

The transformation of the Eastern part of the continent, however, proceeded differently. In the first half of the 1990's several armed conflicts resulted in lack of a lasting peace (Transnistria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and separatisms in Georgia). They generated a potential for instability and contributed to the uncertain security status of the Eastern European countries. Furthermore, the region was not at the center of attention of the Western powers which were focused on the process of creating the institutional foundations of the European Union as well as on the enlargement of the EU and NATO with Central European countries, and on providing stability to the Western Balkans. While it is true that the breakout of conflicts in the eastern part of the continent didn't go completely unnoticed in the key Western states (e.g. engagement of France in the co-chairing of OSCE Minsk Group), more often they were pushed onto the shoulders of international organizations (e.g. the United Nations mission in Abkhazia) or Russia (sometimes acting under the umbrella of the international recognized missions, like in the cases of South Ossetia and Transnistria).

In contrast to Central Europe, Russian military presence remained an important element of the security situation in Eastern Europe. Russian military installations and bases still exist in Belarus, Moldova (Transnistria), Ukraine (the Crimea), on the territory of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Armenia (military base), and Azerbaijan (early warning radar system). It is arguable whether the actions taken by Russian forces in different periods have actually contributed to stability or instability in the region. Nonetheless, the mere fact that some states have questioned Russian presence on their territory proves that frequently it was an antagonizing factor. In any case, military involvement of Russia in Eastern Europe makes it difficult to imagine the solution of the security problems of the region without cooperation with the Kremlin.

At the end of the past decade we could observe a series of events essential to the security of Eastern Europe. Firstly, the enlargement of the EU and

NATO meant that the region became a direct neighbor to these organizations, vital for European security. Due to this situation, the EU and NATO needed to clearly define their interests towards Eastern Europe, including the issue of potential accession. The EU reacted by formulating the initiative of the European Neighborhood Policy (created in the years 2002-2004); the Eastern Partnership (EaP) was added to this framework in 2009. EaP aims to improve the political integration and develop close economic relations between the EU and the region, whilst avoiding the membership perspective. NATO was ready to grant some Eastern European states Membership Action Plans (the case of Ukraine in 2006) and during the summit in Bucharest in 2008 it was agreed that Ukraine and Georgia should be treated like prospective NATO members. Eventually the Alliance did not determine a time frame for their accession, and current cooperation with the countries of the region is based on the mechanism of partnership.

2008 proved to be a difficult year for Eastern Europe as a deep economic crisis limited the EU's absorption possibilities; at the same time, the Russian-Georgian war had a negative impact on NATO's willingness to get involved in the region on a larger scale. It is not true, however, that the West totally gave up on its active policy in Eastern Europe. This is also the case of the sphere of security. It is the EU and its member states that played a decisive role in the ceasefire in Georgia in 2008; they also were able to arrange quickly the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) under the auspices of the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). The European Union Border Assistance Mission Moldova-Ukraine (EUBAM) was an important factor in reducing the risks concerning the Transnistrian "black hole" within the European security system. Finally, contrary to the catastrophic predictions, the EU has not weakened, but even strengthened its involvement in the Nagorno-Karabakh region (in the second half of 2011 Philippe Lefort undertook the mission as the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia; programs were also initiated aimed at building confidence in the conflict zone).

In this respect it is worth noting the actions undertaken by Poland. They are founded upon the belief that building a pan-European security system is possible based on existing institutions. Warsaw has opposed the creation of a division within Europe between the countries belonging to the EU/NATO and those that do not belong. To reduce the risk, Poland is developing practical cooperation with its Eastern partners, especially with Ukraine – the most important country in the region. The Warsaw-Kyiv cooperation

in the sphere of security resulted in the establishment of a common military unit designed for peace-keeping missions, cooperation in foreign security and defense missions, and the exchange of experiences concerning the transformation of armed forces and the security sector.

Priorities of Poland in the sphere of international security

Poland perceives its external security environment as relatively favorable. Security of Poland is based on three pillars: memberships in NATO, membership in the EU, and the bilateral alliance with the United States of America. Also, as a responsible member of both above-mentioned organizations, Poland recognizes the need to consistently develop its own potential in the field of defense.

Realizing its strategic objectives, which include independence, territorial integrity, guaranteeing the preservation of civil liberties, creating the conditions enabling socio-economic development, and securing the state's possibility of shaping the international environment, Poland aims to minimize the surrounding threats and risks.

Poland does not recognize any of its neighbors as a threat. However, some actions undertaken by them can be estimated as the ones which are contrary to Polish interests. Poland is trying to counteract such tendencies, primarily by expanding its own potential. Some threats, especially those of supra-regional nature, present the challenges of an asymmetric character (e.g. terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, development of extremist ideology, international organized crime, environmental problems). An appropriate response to them is the development of cooperation between different political entities that form the network structure of the contemporary international environment.

For Poland, membership in European and Euro-Atlantic institutions anchors the country with the world's most effective security structures. It establishes the conditions for stable, comprehensive development. It is therefore in the essential interest of Poland to preserve the high efficiency of NATO and the EU, enhance their complementarity and improve the cooperation between them, while maintaining the open character of the two organizations.

NATO is the most important instrument for Poland to ensure political-military security. It is in Poland's interest to preserve high efficiency of the

basic functions of the Alliance (namely collective defense). Poland supports the selective involvement of NATO in stabilizing and crisis missions, provided that the overall potential and the core function of the Alliance are not put in question. NATO is regarded by Poland also as a guarantee of the durable transatlantic links.

European integration has brought Poland unique benefits over the past two decades. The EU's further development is, therefore, of vital interest to Poland. As a responsible member of the European family, Poland is committed to the principle of solidarity. In return, Poland expects the EU to develop its engagement in the European neighborhood area. Poland strongly supports the development of the Common Foreign and Security Policy, including the cooperation with the Eastern partners within the CSDP framework.

Promoting democratization in its neighborhood is an important element of Polish security policy. It results from the belief that systems based on the principles of democratic rule of law provide the highest degree of stability, domestic predictability, and a responsible course in foreign policy.

The implementation of Polish security policy objectives is fostered by friendly relations with neighbors and partners. The major formats of multi- and bilateral cooperation include the Weimar Triangle (with Germany and France), the Visegrad Group (Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia), a strategic partnership with Ukraine, and relations with the Baltic states.

Eastern Europe AD 2012

When discussing the most up-to-date security challenges in Eastern Europe it is worth pointing out some important events and trends:

- Impact of the economic collapse of the years 2008-2009 (a double-digit decreases in the GDP of Ukraine and Armenia in 2009, and the not much better situation of Moldova and Georgia; the only positive results were recorded in the oil-rich Azerbaijan, and Belarus which benefited from external subsidies);
- A general decline in the importance of Eastern Europe on the geopolitical map of the world, as a result of the focus of the international community on the challenges in Asia (Iran and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the "Arab Spring", the reconstruction of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the international rivalry in the Pacific region);

- Russia's proposals of new integration projects in the economic and political sphere (Common Economic Space Russia-Belarus-Kazakhstan, and Eurasian Economic Union proposed on its basis). Due to the existence of differences in the economic regimes of the EU and Russia, these projects are in conflict with deep and comprehensive free trade areas proposed by the EU;
- Russia's revitalization of military cooperation: regional (the Collective Security Treaty Organization), and bilateral (the functioning of military bases in Armenia and Ukraine extended until the middle of the twenty-first century, and the dynamic expansion of its military presence on Georgian territory);
- Growing activity of Turkey and China in the region;
- Limiting role of international institutions: the withdrawal of the OSCE and UN missions from the South Caucasus (due to the obstruction of their mandates by Russia) and a stalemate in talks concerning Nagorno-Karabakh;
- The foreign policy of Eastern European countries which appears to be inconsistent and incomprehensible for the West ("balancing", "multivector", "out-of-bloc", "neo-titoism");
- The low level of regional cooperation between Eastern European countries; the differences in the level of their aspirations regarding the cooperation with the West (which is in contrast to the situation in Central Europe in the period 1991-2004); the lack of efficient regional formats similar to the "Visegrad Four". It is generally accepted that the only common denominator within the region is the post-Soviet heritage and pathologies (corruption, poor governance, oligarchism, disregard of the standards of democracy);
- Growing trends of authoritarian consolidation of power which are in contrast to the increasing Western sensitivity to the issues of democratization, caused by the "Arab Spring".

The importance of Eastern Europe for the EU and Poland. The special place of Ukraine

The European Union is, next to Russia, the most important power vis-à-vis Eastern Europe. The prestige and credibility of European foreign policy depends largely on whether the EU will be capable of shaping

the situation in its immediate vicinity. From the EU perspective, its interest in European neighbors is firm and goes beyond the cultural-civilizational sphere. The region is crucial in the context of the diversification of energy supplies (the so-called Southern Corridor). The strategic importance of Eastern Europe results from its location close to Central Asia and in the proximity of conflict zones, in which the West is engaged in militarily activities (Afghanistan), or that constitute a challenge for security (Iran). The region is of vital interest to the EU's largest neighbors, namely Turkey and Russia, with which the EU has relations of cooperation, and also of competition. Eastern Europe markets create opportunities for European business expansion (currently discouraged because of the poor investment climate). The instability of the Eastern European countries, along with the existence of disproportion of wealth between West and East of the continent, results in risks for the EU (such as uncontrolled migration).

It is worth noting that the Polish motivation for an active Eastern policy is specific in comparison with that of the EU. It consists in direct geographical proximity, historical and cultural associations, but also the experience of a successful political transition. Poland considers a natural perspective the gradual integration of Eastern European countries into the Western structures. The gradual removal of barriers, accompanied with the harmonization of standards is seen as an integral part of the process, which leads to the formation of solid foundations of a pan-European security system.

Poland is a strong promoter of cooperation of the EU and NATO with the countries of Eastern Europe, primarily with Ukraine. Warsaw promotes EU-Ukraine cooperation which can be driven by combining mutual civil and military capabilities. During its Presidency in the EU Council, Poland supported the deepening of relations with the Eastern partners, holding Ukraine as a priority. Poland supports the development of NATO-Ukraine cooperation on a permanent basis. The Embassy of Poland in the Ukraine serves as the NATO contact point (2011-2012) and the Polish delegate Marcin Kozieł is the head of NATO Liaison Office in Kyiv.

It should be noted with appreciation that Ukraine considers cooperation with the EU and NATO in the sphere of security both seriously and responsibly. Kyiv joins the majority of the conclusions articulated in the framework of the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. The framework agreement on participation of Ukraine in EU operations (2008) and the agreement on the protection of classified information (2005) are the only EU agreements of this type, signed with partners from the East.

Ukraine participates in the CSDP missions (the EUPM in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Operation Atalanta) and in the work of the EU HELBROC Battle Group (Greece, Bulgaria, Romania, Cyprus). It was Kyiv's initiative in 2005 that allowed the EU and USA to act as observers in the peace negotiations on Transnistria.

Ukraine is also involved in NATO operations (ISAF – including medical staff in Ghazni, Active Endeavour, and KFOR). Ukraine declared its contribution to the NATO Response Forces. The Annual National Program NATO-Ukraine contributes to the interoperability of the Alliance armed forces and Ukraine's, making easier for it to take part in joint stabilization activities.

Kyiv's policy, focused on responsible and practical involvement within the security sphere, bear fruits for Ukraine as well as for the EU and the North Atlantic Alliance.

The EU, Poland and (non-)frozen conflicts

The Russian-Georgian war of August 2008, and repeated incidents on the military ceasefire line in Nagorno-Karabakh, discredited the notion of "frozen conflicts". Unsettled, protracted disputes in Eastern Europe could easily get out of control and cross into a phase of escalation, which could include the initiation of military action. They represent a serious challenge in the field of security. Limiting oneself just to maintaining the status quo proved to be a shortsighted policy – the cost of passivity and inaction turns out to be higher than the cost of active involvement. The prolonged conflicts obviously have a demoralizing effect on the situation in individual countries. Conflicts distract attention from the issues of modernization and necessary reforms. They consume budgetary expenditures and impose the shape of policy agenda. This in turn discourages potential investors, fuels corruption, and contributes to non-transparent connections between politicians and corrupted business structures.

Although the European Union with its anti-crisis tools is far from the ideal, the community is facing the need to address the conflicts in its eastern neighborhood. Especially since there are no other candidates to take on this role: Eastern Europe is not part of the current priorities of NATO; the OSCE is crippled by a lack of consensus among its participating states; and the contribution of the UN is negligible.

Up to now the EU has not been able to exploit its political and economic potential to play a significant role in the areas of prolonged conflict. This has been primarily a result of the general weakness of its Common Foreign and Security Policy. Moreover, the coordination of the various instruments used by Europe in external relations (like the technical assistance under the European Neighborhood Policy, CSDP missions, and bilateral cooperation with individual states) was insufficient. Finally, the EU's involvement in security policy in Eastern Europe was "reactive" i.e. producing *ad hoc* responses to emerging crises. Mistakes were made starting from the planning phase: the final goals set for missions were often too ambitious in relation to the resources dedicated for the given task. These shortcomings undermined the credibility of EU policy in the East.

Nevertheless, the overall picture is not solely pessimistic. The Union reported some successes, effectively intervening in crisis situations and contributing to strengthening the stability in volatile regions. In this context three CSDP missions launched in Eastern Europe should be noted:

- EUJUST Themis (2004, the EU rule-of-law mission to Georgia focused on strengthening the Georgian justice system);
- EUBAM Moldova-Ukraine (2005, the development of border management practices to support the functioning of the Ukrainian-Moldovan border, the mission launched by the European Council, funded and managed by the European Commission);
- EUMM (2008, Georgia, reaction to the Russian-Georgian war; mission aimed at stabilization and normalization in the conflict zone. The Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism under EUMM led to a reduction of tension between the former warring parties. The mission also provides reliable information from the conflict zone).

Furthermore, the appointment of EU special envoys (EU Special Representatives, EUSR) is an example of constructive engagement in the East. Since 2003 they have been dealing with the crises on South Caucasus and from 2005 – in Moldova.

One should not forget about the EU's backing for the structural reforms in the region. That support has long-term consequences for lasting stability. These can be seen through gradual implementation (despite the crisis) of the instruments within the framework of the Eastern Partnership.

Poland is firmly committed to the afore-mentioned actions. The contribution of Poland is important to EUBAM and EUMM missions: Polish General Andrzej Tyszkiewicz has been in charge of the second mission since

July 2011. In the EU, it is Warsaw that initiates discussions on security issues concerning Eastern Europe. Apart from that, numerous informal meetings of experts, officials and politicians from East European countries with their EU counterparts, are held in Poland. The final declaration from the second summit of the Eastern Partnership held in Warsaw in September 2011 indicates a possible expansion of the components of security within the EaP.

The EaP itself also enables the "re-branding" of the region which is welcomed in light of the fact that its reputation was poor and perceived through the prism of its Soviet past.

Poland is also taking part in actions outside the EU format: The Polish Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk is a Special Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, and Polish experts are represented in the structures of NATO in Eastern Europe (such as staff liaison officers of the Alliance).

Conclusion: is the crisis an opportunity?

At the beginning of 2012, the regional security situation in Central and Eastern Europe remains ambiguous. Prolonged conflicts of the past twenty years have not been resolved. The process of enlargement of the European and Euro-Atlantic institutions, which had had a stabilizing effect throughout the previous two decades, seems to have slowed. There is a risk of new divisions in this part of the continent: between the countries with strong security guarantees (members of the EU and NATO) and the those, who face uncertainty.

The global economic crisis sharpens and accelerates tendencies that influence the international environment. It seems that, in particular, the "multivector" policy is now reaching its natural limits. Maintaining "an equal distance" from regional power centers (EU, Russia, and Turkey) in a long term perspective does not guarantee success. It becomes easier to survive a period of turbulence as a member of one of the emerging integration systems, or at least as a state that closely cooperates with such a one.

The crisis provides an opportunity to create new openings. Poland, as a member of the European community, expects the EU to pursue such moves. Current problems can cause a temporary decrease in the attractiveness of the EU model. However, it is likely that new, "post-crisis" Union will be more active in the East.

In relations with the countries showing strong ambitions of integration, the EU cannot avoid the issue of redefining its attitude to the issue of their membership. At this stage, the EU decided on a "meritocratic" approach, that is, a close linkage between the integration instruments offered to Eastern neighbors and the reforms undertaken by the given state (according to the principle "more for more" contained in the revision of the European Neighborhood Policy of May 2011).

The issue of human rights for the EU is non-negotiable – the events in the southern neighborhood convincingly proved that the dilemma of "stability versus freedom" is false, and that it is not possible to achieve a sustainable internal balance without observing the system of a democratic rule of law.

In respect to the sphere of security, including ongoing conflicts, the EU room for maneuver ranges from the consistent policy of non-recognition of all entities that have arisen from the violation of international law, and to making sure that they are not totally internationally isolated. Hence the possibility of a wide use of "soft" tools for reducing tensions in conflict zones does exist: it is possible to facilitate local and regional cooperation, to support the development of civil societies, to contact those on opposite sides of the temporary border lines, to involve local elites in multilateral projects of a neutral character (e.g. science, journalism), and to undertake limited economic cooperation. These forms of cooperation may create favorable ground for the most difficult negotiations – concerning the final political status of breakaway regions. Combining the tools available to the EU in the field of traditional security policy (CSDP missions, diplomatic measures, sanctions, confidence-building measures), with instruments dedicated to bring "soft" effects seems to be offering promising perspectives. The Eastern Partnership brings added value to the EU policy – not only by the possible development of programs aimed at the security sphere, but also by the fact of creating a multilateral platform for dialogue.

The key to building stability in Central and Eastern Europe is to break the stereotypes thinking in the bloc terms. This can be achieved through bilateral and multilateral cooperation. Poland and Ukraine, the two most important countries in the region, play a leading role in this context.

Breaking the barriers of mistrust between the West and the East of the continent is possible. The good example of it is the enhanced dialogue of Ukraine with NATO and the EU. Positive experience of Ukraine's participation in stabilizing missions and initiatives undertaken by these organizations is particularly encouraging.

Warsaw and Kiyv have "hard" security instruments at their disposal. The formation of the Polish-Ukrainian-Lithuanian brigade intended to participate in peacekeeping missions, the cooperation developed under CSDP, the politico-military dialogue, and the opportunities that exist in the field of sharing defense capabilities belong to them.

An area of particular interest for Polish and Ukrainian initiatives is the situation in Transnistria. Traditionally both countries have close and good relations with Moldova. It seems that reaching of an agreement among the parties is conceivable in the medium term. This is due to a favorable international climate created by the "reset" of US-Russian relations, and the improvement of Polish-Russian relations. The contribution of Poland and Ukraine, the latter to hold the OSCE chairmanship in 2013, should become a visible input of both countries in strengthening the European security system.

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