



**BANITZA**



## **Poland – Eastern Europe’s role model**

*by Dimitar Dimitrov\**

“The land of particularly responsible witness”

This was the phrase Pope John Pavel II used to characterise Poland in an inspirational address to those hundreds of thousands gathered around Warsaw’s Victory Square in 1979. Less than a year after his inauguration as the Head of the Catholic Church, the Wadowice-born Karol Wojtyła returned to his motherland despite the hostile atheism of the totalitarian regime in power. In what many historians and analysts have regarded as a critical turning point setting the scene for the downfall of the Iron Curtain, the cleric invoked the notorious Polish spirit and urged his nation to regain control of its fate. Albeit an indirect one, this was a major symbolical challenge to Soviet communism and its dominance over all aspects of Polish life.

For 45 years, Poland would always be the thorn in the USSR’s side and one of the Eastern bloc’s most defiant and reluctant members. In the immediate aftermath of the Pope’s historical visit, another significant development changed the course of Polish history. As the country entered the 1980s into the state of severe economic crisis with skyrocketing food prices, a vigorous and independent trade union was formed, despite the totalitarian nature of the regime and its constitution. Under the leadership of Lech Wałęsa, *Solidarity* quickly gained the support and sympathy of the Polish people, who experienced their first, albeit profoundly limited, encounter with citizens’ rights.

Many years later Karol Modzelewski, a prominent activist of *Solidarity*, commented on the achievement: “For someone who had lived under communism, it was like a narcotic”. Strikes were breaking out regularly and the union’s membership had quickly reached 9 million. Its subsequent outlawing and the arrest of Wałęsa prevented an intervention by the Soviet military but failed to control the wind of change. *Solidarity*’s victory in the first free Polish elections set off a domino effect in Eastern Europe’s peaceful revolutions and the end of the total Soviet dominance in the region.

## II

As we enter yet another phase of Russia's renewed efforts to bring certain parts of the so-called "near abroad" under its own sphere of influence, it is Poland again that takes the most resolute stance against those dynamics. At the earlier stage of the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, the government in Warsaw was at the centre of the diplomatic bargaining that aided the ousting of the former President Viktor Yanukovich.



***Lech Wałęsa and Solidarnost. Image: EUobserver/Polish Government***

Following the Crimean annexation and the mass deployment of Russian troops on Ukraine's eastern border, the Polish government was first to demand a decisive NATO response and the positioning of 10,000 Alliance troops on its territory. The request has hardly surprised anyone, given the turbulent history of the Russo-Polish relations and the frequent instances of Kremlin aggression in the past.

In fact, the role of NATO and the US in Eastern Europe has been one of the key points of conflict between Warsaw and Moscow since 1989. As Marcin Kaczmarski has stressed, what Poland has regarded as the most vital safeguard for the peace and security in the region, Kremlin has seen as the main impediment for advancing its strategic interests. Indeed, dating back to the period of its Tsarist regime, Russia has traditionally reacted to its own geographical vulnerabilities by perceiving "security in terms of space". Kennedy-Pipe summarises that this notion has often necessitated the seizure of and influence upon neighbouring territories – the several divisions of Poland and the subordination of Ukraine and the Transcaucasus in previous centuries being a case in point. While it is far from difficult to spot the elements of continuity in the contemporary manoeuvring of Kremlin, a more complicated task has burdened Warsaw in its attempt to oppose it.

Together with the initial reluctance of its NATO partners to commit forces for the deterrence of further Russian aggression in Eastern Europe, the Polish cabinet also had to cope with its absence from the conflict resolution talks between Russia, Ukraine, Germany and France held this summer. Some analysts have attributed Poland's diplomatic exclusion to Berlin's desperate mediating efforts. In case their failure to reach a political solution of the Ukrainian crisis persists and the conflict deteriorates, the German authorities would be faced with a critical scenario they want to avoid. As Piotr Buras suggests, where Chancellor Merkel and her government fear to take a decisive stance in support of one of the conflicting parties, the Poles know where they stand. Warsaw also believes that the escalation of the fighting in Eastern Ukraine and the increased probability of a lengthy, frozen conflict are a partial result of Berlin's poor and impotent response to the Russian moves at the initial stage of the crisis.

So what, if anything, do the examples of John Pavel II, *Solidarity* and Poland's current policy on the Ukrainian conflict share in common? All the above-mentioned case studies underline a trend which is pretty remarkable for post-communist Eastern Europe. Rather than being a passive observer of the developments around them, the Polish people have demonstrated the vision and courage necessary for the active participation in the big table of international politics and shaping of history. In a "two-speed" union which is still very often divided between the wealthier Western Europe and its stagnating Eastern backyard, Poland has achieved remarkable political and economic gains.

First, back in 2007 the government of Jarosław Kaczyński worked its way through significant diplomatic opposition to shape the current EU voting system. Second, over the last decade Warsaw has turned into Berlin's key economic and political partner in shaping the EU *Ostpolitik*. Third, in December the former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk will become the first Eastern European politician to head the European Council. Fourth, Jens Stoltenberg, the newly appointed Secretary General of NATO, has very recently made his first foreign visit - guess where - in Poland.

Of course, some of these Polish successes - especially the appointment of Tusk - could be attributed to the country's more assertive and vigorous foreign policy towards Russia, but in general the underlying factors are to be found elsewhere. As Jan Cieski from *The Economist* emphasises, the successful foreign policy of Warsaw is a function of its remarkable economic performance enabled by the millions of small enterprises which have transformed Poland since the fall of communism. Indeed, it is particularly impressive that ever since 1992 the country has not fallen into recession even once and its GDP per capita has increased more than 13 times.

### III

Without a doubt, the political and economic achievements of Warsaw could serve as an inspiration to those Eastern European countries which still need to cope with their communist past and bring the so-called transition process to an effective end. A short glimpse at the opposite side of the regional spectrum leads us to the example of Bulgaria. Depicted as the EU poorest member in much of its news coverage, the country often remains undecided between its supposedly pro-European orientation and its closer cultural, linguistic and historical links with Russia. A balanced position between the two camps would not necessarily have been such an issue in itself. However, things appear more problematic whenever some of Bulgaria's partners suspect it of being Moscow's Trojan Horse in Brussels or prominent historians like Timothy Snyder claim that the Kremlin has bought off the whole Bulgarian Parliament.

"We are telling Bulgaria to be very careful", admitted Jose Manuel Barroso earlier this year. The previous Head of the European Commission has warned that certain high-profile figures in Bulgaria act as agents of Russia. As such, they aim to negotiate a bilateral deal that would enable Moscow to finish the controversial South Stream pipeline, despite its inconsistency with the existing EU regulations.

Unfortunately, the high levels of corruption, the criminal monopoly and influence of strong private interests, and the lack of popular trust in the poorly functioning state institutions continue to stumble the progress of the deeply polarized Bulgarian society.

Crucially, where the Poles have had strong leading and unifying figures like Woytyła, Wałęsa, and most recently, Tusk the Bulgarian establishment consists mainly of short-sighted populists and Kremlin cronies. A particularly telling is the example of Sergei Stanishev, who many in Bulgaria (and elsewhere) depict as the personification of political arrogance and failure. In a personal conversation with a German diplomat last year, the latter revealed to me his astonishment that the President of PES was the only European socialist leader who advocated in favor of nuclear energy. Thus, Stanishev and his Bulgarian Socialist Party initiated a referendum on a new Bulgarian nuclear power plant to be built by... Russia.

While the comparison between Warsaw and Sofia might appear pretty unfavorable for the latter, there are still many in Bulgaria - and in the rest of the region - who remain eager to play catch up with the West; to be active and equal members of the organisations to which they *chose* to belong; to build more vibrant economies under the undisputed rule of law; to withstand unwelcome, external interference in their sovereign decisions and rights.

In their ongoing striving to do so, the pro-European political and social groups in the East should note a memorable BBC quote regarding the Poles: "Poland is seen as a problem. Many European leaders find it hard to swallow the *Polish spirit*: too harsh, too challenging, enough indeed to make them sputter and choke".

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