

## Reluctantly European?

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Krzysztof Jasiewicz is professor of sociology at Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia, and a research fellow at the Polish Academy of Sciences' Institute for Political Studies. Most Poles are still in favour of joining the European Union, but the number of supporters has decreased since the mid-1990s. At that time, support for EU membership regularly exceeded 70 percent, even reaching 80 percent in May 1996. But since 1999, the polls have told a different story. While support for EU membership has been consistently above 50 percent over the past three years, it has not been anywhere near the earlier levels. The most recent figures from the CBOS polling agency, dating from December 2001, put the number who would vote "yes" in a referendum on accession at 60 percent.

The causes of the apparent rise of Euroscepticism in Poland range from fears of a loss of "national identity," articulated in both ethnic and religious terms, to possible economic consequences for interest groups such as farmers. As yet, these groups have little in common besides their opposition to accession, although they have gained increasing space in the Polish media. Politically, the debate remains driven largely by ethnic and religious nationalism. In the future, however, it is likely that nationalist groups will seize upon widespread economic fears to strengthen their case against political union. Despite--or partly because of--EU aspirations toward political and religious diversity, the issue of accession is in danger of becoming a rallying point in Poland for those who oppose such "cosmopolitanism," in part because the case for economic integration has not been presented convincingly.

Throughout the 1990s, there was political consensus in Poland on the desirability of quick accession to both the EU and NATO, encompassing the post-communist left, the centrists, and the right. Poland's entry into NATO in March 1999 was opposed by just one small group in the Polish parliament, the Catholic organisation *Nasze Kolo* (Our Circle), numbering only seven deputies.

EU accession, which has been a longer and more complicated process this far, looks unlikely to achieve comparable support. Although EU opponents fared badly in the October 2000 presidential election, collectively garnering no more than 10 percent of the vote, Euroskeptics recorded significant gains in the September 2001 parliamentary elections. The League of Polish Families, a grassroots Catholic coalition that focused its campaign on an anti-EU platform, won 8 percent of the vote and 38 seats. Another strong opponent, Self-Defense, a radical organisation of Polish farmers, fared even better, receiving 10 percent of the vote and 53 seats. Several other parties expressed only conditional support for EU membership.

In fact, only two parties with seats in the current parliament can be viewed as unequivocally pro-EU: the post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which is the senior party in Poland's governing coalition, and the opposition Civic Platform (PO). Between them, those two parties control 265 of the 460 parliamentary seats.

The controversy over the nation's future place in Europe reflects fundamental divides in Polish politics. Since the transition, politics in Poland has been defined by two polarities: one socioeconomic, between a neo-liberal free market and an interventionist welfare state, and the other ideological, between political liberalism and ethnic nationalism. The latter is often articulated in Poland as a choice between secular or religious conceptions of social order or between civic and ethnocentric visions of the nation. Appeals to "traditional values," combining Polish nationalism with a strong attachment to Catholic dogma and rejecting communism as the negation of those values, carry some weight. The secular-civic view, on the other hand, is less well defined, identified more by a rejection of nationalist-Catholic ideology than by any positive factors.

Fundamentalist Catholicism and ethnic nationalism both offer grounds for opposition to the EU as being allegedly materialist, secular, and "cosmopolitan". Once Poland becomes a member, this argument runs, the national and religious identity of the Polish people will be destroyed. Such ideas are strongly articulated on Radio Maryja, a nation-wide network that reaches as many as 4 million regular listeners and enjoys a virtual monopoly over Catholic broadcasting in Poland. The station has the potential to become a focal point of anti-European resistance as negotiations with the European Commission progress and the referendum draws near. Radio Maryja has been joined in its campaign by the daily newspapers *Nasz Dziennik* (Our Daily) and *Nasza Polska* (Our Poland). All these media outlets were instrumental in securing seats in parliament for the League of Polish Families.

As to socioeconomic factors, according to the most recent opinion polls by the CBOS polling agency, Euro-enthusiasts tend to be well-educated young urban professionals; they are in the minority among poorly educated and older rural dwellers. Euroskeptics predominate among those who perceive themselves as losers in the transition from communism. These are people who feel vulnerable in the face of the potential challenges to their families and communities posed by Poland's accession. Such people make up the core constituency of Self-Defense, which in the 2001 election managed to attract support from the urban as well as the rural population.

While there is a clear positive correlation between religious attitudes and Euroscepticism, attitudes toward the EU do not split along a clear left-right axis. Today, Euroskeptics would lose a referendum by a substantial margin across the political spectrum. Indeed, the left appears, if anything, more reluctant than the right to enter the EU.

In addition, anti-EU politicians tend to focus on issues that are not of overriding concern to many people: the alleged threat to Polish national identity, traditions, and values. Voters are often more concerned about their daily bread. Farmers, for example, worry about the markets for their produce in open competition with the high-tech, subsidised Western member states. However, that may change. While it is a truism that public opinion is volatile, in this case it may be even more so, for at least three reasons.

First, a relatively high percentage of respondents express no opinion on many issues related to European integration. This indicates a generally low level of information on these issues among the public. As the referendum nears, people may seek more information - at the same time, more will be available through the government and the media. This information will likely highlight both positive and negative aspects of integration. However, as media pundits are aware, negatives often sell better than positives. There is therefore some potential for a swing in opinion away from the pro-European camp and for a consolidation of Euroskeptical positions.

Second, and more important, it will be a while before any referendum takes place. Political and economic developments in the country between now and then will have a critical impact on the way people will vote. The opinion polls cited above indicate that, due to an association of the EU with market friendly neo-liberal economics, Euroscepticism tends to gain with negative economic trends such as high unemployment (currently standing at 18 percent). These dominate in the media and in the mind of the public over positive trends such as low inflation or a strong domestic currency. Any worsening of economic indicators on the eve of the referendum may swing public opinion, and the consequences may be both swift and far-reaching.

Finally, ideologically motivated politicians are well-placed to exploit the latent economic fears shared by many Poles. Nationalist opponents of Poland's EU candidacy are already using arguments of a more pragmatic nature on the waves of Radio Maryja and in print publications. These focus in particular on the potential for unfair competition between Polish and EU producers and merchants in the agricultural sector and beyond. (Their favourite villains are

Western supermarkets, allegedly forcing locally owned shops out of business). At the same time, the general public demonstrates some receptiveness to ideological Euroscepticism, in particular to arguments involving economic nationalism (the purchase of land by foreigners) and national sovereignty.

Furthermore, ideological Euroskeptics enjoy, through Radio Maryja, *Nasz Dziennik*, and similar media outlets, relatively easy access to milieus where economically and socially motivated Euroscepticism is already strong. These are, in particular, farmers, but also other rural inhabitants and certain dissatisfied urban pockets. The potential for an orchestrated anti-EU effort prior to the referendum is thus strong.

In December 2001, Poles would have voted to join the EU. Whether they will still do so in the actual referendum remains an open question.