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A farewell to Giedroyc

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The plans for the future of TV Belsat presented by Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski are a good excuse for an overall reflection on Poland's eastern policy as it is being conducted today. The proposal to drastically reduce Belsat's funding and pass those savings on to funds for a new Polish-language channel to be broadcast abroad, including officially to Belarus, should not be seen as a one-off decision. It is a symptom of a fundamental turn-around: the departure from the assumptions that have guided nearly 25 years of Poland's policy towards its Eastern European neighbours. Symbolically, this change can be described as 'a farewell to Giedroyc'.

No free Poland without a free Ukraine

Despite various twists and turns, the Third Republic's eastern policy has constantly drawn on several fundamental principles¹. The roots of these principles lay in the concept, formulated in the 1960s by Mieroszewski and Giedroyc, of how to approach Ukraine, Lithuania and Belarus (ULB for short), which were then parts of the USSR². These principles can be summarised as follows: Poland's freedom is closely linked to the sovereignty (*de facto* independence from Russia) of our eastern neighbours. If

1 In Polish historiography, periods of the statehood of the Republic of Poland (Pol. *Rzeczpospolita Polska*) are unofficially numbered as follows: the First Republic (Pol. *I. Rzeczpospolita*, from the mid-15th century until the final partition of 1795), the Second Republic (Pol. *II. Rzeczpospolita*, 1918–1945) and the Third Republic (Pol. *III. Rzeczpospolita*, after the democratic transition of 1989). The period of Communist rule (1944–1989) are referred to as People's Poland (Pol. *Polska Ludowa*).

2 **Juliusz Mieroszewski** was an journalist, publicist and political commentator. He was editor of the English version of the influential émigré journal *Kultura* published in Paris. He was also a close collaborator and friend of **Jerzy Giedroyc**, a Polish writer, political activist, publisher and editor of *Kultura*.

they resist Russia's imperial designs, then Moscow will no longer want to strive to suppress Polish sovereignty. That is why Warsaw should support the independence of these countries, which means renouncing its own imperial aspirations to the ULB; above all, accepting the eastern Polish border drawn up after the war as final and inviolable. Another condition conducive to the full sovereignty of the states of Central and Eastern Europe is their democratisation. Authoritarian systems of government will automatically set these countries in opposition to the West, and will consequently make them susceptible to the temptation to seek support from Russia.

In accordance with this logic, the promotion of democracy in Belarus and Ukraine – one manifestation of which was the creation of TV Belsat, broadcasting in the Belarusian language – constituted more than simply demonstrations of support for certain values. It primarily meant undertaking activity in support of the true independence of our Eastern European neighbours, and thus, indirectly, of Polish sovereignty as well.

Polishness above all

Superficially, all the principles of Polish eastern policy as described above remain operational. In the plan for aid to developing countries for the years 2016-2020, as in previous years, Ukraine and Belarus are listed as priority partners, and the main objectives of Polish policy include “support for the process of democratisation and reform of the state, the construction of modern state institutions, the promotion of human rights, and support for civil society”. Declarations of Polish involvement in the process of strengthening democracy in Ukraine were also repeatedly heard in statements by Polish politicians, including President Andrzej Duda and Minister Waszczykowski.

However, contrary to these formal provisions and verbal assurances, Poland's Eastern policy is undergoing a fundamental change: support for democracy in its eastern neighbourhood is ceasing to be a priority. At the forefront of this change is the issue of the promotion of Polishness.

The plan to reduce funding for Belsat and allocate additional resources to the Polish-language TV overseas channel is neither the first nor the only action confirming this change. The budget cuts will also apply to the Polish-based *Radia Ratsya* which broadcasts in Belarusian. Last year, the government repeatedly reduced the pool of money allocated to activities by Polish entities for democratisation in the countries of Eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine. Nor did Poland in principle participate in the planning and implementation of Brussels' modernisation and democratisation projects targeted at Ukraine.

At the same time, 2016 was full of Polish-Belarusian meetings at the highest level. It is indicative that during Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's visit to Minsk, he met President Lukashenko, but no meetings were arranged with the non-governmental pro-democracy groups.

This departure from the policy of supporting democratisation has been accompanied by an increasing emphasis on the promotion of Polishness. The conviction of the need to boost assistance for the ethnic Polish diaspora³ and Poles abroad, especially compatriots from Eastern Europe, sounded loud and clear even in PiS's pre-election statements. These statements were even given substance by an amendment to the Act on the Polish Card which increased the document's availability and

3 Referred to as *Polonia*, and roughly estimated at around 20 million people.

attractiveness, *inter alia* by allowing the submission of requests for the document not only in Polish consulates, but also in provincial offices. In addition, financial assistance was offered not only to the Card-holders themselves, but also to members of their families⁴.

However, the promotion of Polishness in the East goes far beyond the issue of the Polish community. In the words of Minister Waszczykowski, the project for the new Polish-language television would be addressed to all people interested in contact with Poland and the Polish language. This 'Poland-centric' Eastern policy also includes a completely new approach to historical memory, as clearly demonstrated by the discussion around the Volhynia crimes. For Poland's part, the conviction has clearly intensified that Ukrainian respect for our historical sensitivity – and thus for this view of history, which in Poland is considered to be the correct one – is fundamentally important to the development of good relations between our countries.

The illusion of power

These new trends in eastern policy are, at least in part, a response to the changing reality. After twenty years of the most diverse sanctions against Minsk, it is difficult not to acknowledge the fact that the majority of Belarusian society is not interested in Polish and EU protection against the 'dictatorial' oppression of Lukashenko. In this context, the results of opinion polls among Belarusians are indicative, as they show support for the Union increasing after the lifting of most of its sanctions against Minsk.

This does not mean that there are no reliable democratic groups in Belarus which should continue to receive encouragement from Poland and the EU. However, maintaining the policy of freezing relations with the Belarusian government would now be totally irrational, and simply be a display of a disconnection from reality.

Also, promoting Polishness seems to be an entirely reasonable approach. The demand to learn the Polish language, which has been visibly rising for several years in Ukraine and Belarus, definitely deserves an appropriate response from our country. One element of this response should be to modernise the archaic and unattractive presentation of TV Polonia.

Thus the eastern policy concept as founded on the ideas of Giedroyc and Mieroszewski undoubtedly requires alterations. Nevertheless, this does not change the fact that in its fundamental assumptions, this policy is today perhaps more relevant than ever in the last 25 years.

The democratisation of Ukraine remains a necessary (though not of itself sufficient) condition for its independence. The quarter-century that has passed since the collapse of the USSR has clearly shown that authoritarianism and susceptibility to Russian influence limiting the sovereignty of Ukraine are extremely closely related. Every time antidemocratic tendencies arose in Ukraine, the pathological relationship between Ukrainian and Russian political & business elites was strengthened, which resulted in Kiev becoming dependent on Moscow. **Meanwhile, the real (and not merely formal) independence of Ukraine is today more important for Poland than at any time in the past few decades.**

⁴ The Polish Card (Pol. *Karta Polaka*) is a document confirming that the holder belongs to the Polish nation, and is issued to representatives of the Polish diaspora who do not hold Polish citizenship. The Card eases procedures for registering residence in Poland, among other benefits.

By repeating statements about a 'strong Poland', 'able to fight in the EU and NATO for its own interests', we forget that our country is not self-sufficient in the security dimension. Sovereignty does not mean that we are able to defend ourselves, but rather that we can choose our allies. In turn, the reliability of those allies is an important factor in defining the boundaries of our security. Meanwhile, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, the willingness of our main ally – the United States – to undertake a principled defence of the trans-Atlantic area of security has been called into question. And apart from the disturbing signals coming out of Washington, an increasing challenge to the cohesion of NATO is being posed by the authoritarian and anti-Western course adopted by Turkey, the Alliance's second-largest member in terms of military strength.

In this situation, the constellation of forces in our immediate environment takes on particular importance. The independence of the ULB (to use Giedroyc's abbreviation), especially Ukraine, is a key factor which serves as a barrier to the concept of 'limited sovereignty' which Russia is articulating ever more actively with regard to its neighbours. This concept pushes Russia's right to block such decisions by its neighbours which, according to Moscow, threaten its security (such as the presence of NATO forces in Ukraine, the installation of the US missile defence system in Poland, etc.). **In the increasingly complex international situation in which Poland operates today, failure to support democracy in Eastern Europe, particularly in Ukraine, must be regarded as contrary to our basic security interests.**

The demons of nationalism

In this new international reality, we cannot turn a blind eye to the risks associated with the inadequate and overly aggressive promotion of Polishness. **It would be naïve to think that the fear of Polish domination in Eastern Europe (even if atavistic) has completely disappeared.** The restrictive policy in Lithuania against the Polish minority is proof that, in a more or less open form, such fears still play on the minds of some politicians and social groups. **The fact that in past decades any promotion of Polishness in the East took place in parallel with the spread of democratic and pro-European values significantly helped to reduce these concerns. The idea of 'converting' Belsat to a Polish-language station broadcast on official television channels in Belarus definitely breaks this rule.** It is clear that the project would require the approval of Lukashenko, who will expect the channel's content to be adapted to the requirements of his authoritarian, pro-Moscow, Belarusian regime. Thus, even if the idea never goes past the planning stage, the same willingness to make the content of Polish-language television hostage to the expectations of this pro-Russian satrap cannot but be received in Ukraine, or even in Lithuania, as a disturbing fact at the very least.

These concerns may also be exacerbated by the assertive historical narrative being promoted today by the Polish government, as well as by the increase in our country over recent months of nationalist incidents, which unfortunately have not been unequivocally condemned by the highest authorities of the Republic of Poland. There is a risk that even if we do not want this to happen, this careless policy of promoting Polishness, conducted at the expense of support for democracy, will awaken our neighbours' concerns about the return of Polish neo-imperialism. If that were to happen, Poland could lose a great deal: a positive attitude to our country among the Poles living in Ukraine, who certainly do not want to become the victims of a collision between Polish and Ukrainian nationalisms. Above all, however, we may undermine that upon which, according to Giedroyc's concept, the security of the entire region should be built: the trust between states and societies that, with regard to the issue of our countries' sovereignties, we are always on the same side of the barricades.

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