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Visions of the European Union in Perceptions of Polish Political Elites in the Years 1990-2005

Attitudes towards integration are an issue for which Poles – for the first time in decades – refer to the future instead of the past, they look “ahead” instead of “looking back”. The axes of division, made permanent by traditions of the past 50 years, determined by longing for pre-war or socialist era, longing for Communism or for the time of fight and resistance to Communism, start to fade away, lose importance and become replaced by new axes, which bring a new order to human relationships. As the generations educated and shaped in the Socialist Poland go away, perceptions of own country and the surrounding world are and will be formed by people shaped already in Poland, which is not a socialist one but one of real democracy, people for whom experiences of Europe divided by the “Iron Curtain” are just a part of history. One of those new axes of division is determined by attitude towards the membership, location of own country within the Union and diversified visions of the future of the EU project. Disputes concerning the shape and development lines of the European Union are at the same time disputes concerning the shape of future Poland and they will accompany us in the forthcoming decades because those are disputes not only about us and our fellow Europeans, but also about preservation of what we have inherited and what we would like to bequeath to those who will come after us. The attitude and mental disposition we start this new stage as a member state with, will determine the further process and final success of our accession, our involvement in the building of a common Union.

The considerations presented below are accompanied by a question concerning the role played by Polish parliamentary elites in the shaping of the

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social perceptions of the Union in the past 15 years. It is beyond any doubt that both in the beginning of our road to the membership and now, those elites were the main source of knowledge, shaping social perceptions of the hopes and barriers of the accession, costs and benefits of carrying this project into effect. Their interpretations are of great – although not exclusive – importance for understanding social attitudes towards the change taking place, understanding the sources of the hopes cherished and failures or misfortunes sustained. Another question concerns the fact whether Polish parliamentary elites have developed a relatively coherent concept for “the future”, encompassing understanding of the meaning of integration and to what extent it corresponds to concepts prevailing among political communities of other member states. I think that an answer to the latter question is one of the tasks of this conference.

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A sociological reflection on political elites had not been undertaken in Poland until 1989 and the first analyses documented by public opinion polls concern MPs of the 10th term of office of the Sejm, which will be known in the history as the Term of Office of the Contractual Sejm.¹ Those studies, continued during subsequent terms of office of the Sejm, were published and are now a valuable testimony to the process, which was defined by the team of research implementators headed by Włodzimierz Wesołowski as “the birth of parliamentary elite”.² From the very start their authors defined a very broad range of problems relating to the arising new political class in Poland after the changes of 1989.³ The studies also covered the issues relating to attitudes

¹ As a result of the proceedings of the Round Table (March 1989) a settlement was adopted admitting participation of the opposition in elections for the Parliament in June 1989 subject to conditions of the Contract stipulating that regardless of the election results, 65% of the mandates in the Sejm will be allocated to candidates appointed by the government and 35% of mandates – to candidates of the opposition.

² Beginnings of the parliamentary elite, (MPs of the Contractual Sejm) J.Wasilewski, W.Wesołowski (head of research), I.Bialecki, R.Gortad, E.Karpowicz, K.Lelińska, B.Mach, E.Nalewajko, I.Pankow (editor), B.Post, E.Skotnicka-Illasiewicz, published by IFiS PAN, Warszawa.

³ In a series of research on shaping of the political elite in Poland initiated and carried out by Professor Włodzimierz Wesołowski, the issues related to European integration were taken into account starting from the second study in the series and were analyzed in subsequent volumes: *The World of Political Elite* (IFiS PAN, 1995) and *Politics and the Sejm* (Wyd. Sejmowe, 1998). Moreover a similar approach to those issues was presented in a study on graduates from the School for Young Political Leaders (*Young Leaders of Changes*, Scholar, 1999).

among MPs towards the integration process, on the assumption that the way how it is perceived and interpreted is a significant dimension of the political culture differentiating politicians both between and within individual parties and MP clubs, thus co-creating the new framework of the structure of political scene in the transforming Poland. Initially attitudes towards the Union were differentiated only by the scope of openness to this part of Europe that until recently remained outside the barrier of the iron curtain. A directive of this openness was at that time formulated by the first prime minister as “return to Europe”. In this first Sejm hardly anyone spoke openly of integration, much less of membership in the European Union. One can find evidence of this uncertainty in speeches of the MPs of that time: some spoke merely of “... *potential for cooperation (...) and a need to request passports without visas for politicians*”, some spoke of “*European normality*” not encumbered with the years of fight in the opposition ranks. Although many MPs were worried “... *that today (1990: ES-I) we lack a compass defining the direction of the change taking place*”, a courage to show this direction came only when steps were undertaken for Association with the Union. One of prominent MPs of that contractual term of office ascertained: “... *we talk about a common European home but that is just a slogan and nothing more, and nothing results nor will ever result of that*”.

In the Sejm of the First Term of Office⁴ (1991-1993) works were undertaken on the Association Agreement. The perspective of membership was still for most MPs very vague and remote and the resolve of the representatives of the Government of the Republic of Poland negotiating the tenor of this agreement, including the provisions giving shape to the timeframe of Poland's accession to the European Union exceeded political imagination of many MPs. But even then some division lines emerged around the axis determined by differences in definition of the emerging integration process. One of the requirements of political correctness of that period was not to challenge the selected direction “towards the West”. This rule was particularly strictly followed by MPs coming from post-Communist parties (SLD, PSL) so as not to be accused of maintaining pro-eastern sentiments. Very few MPs representing an extreme wing of the national-Christian club (ZChN, PC), raised fears of a threat to national identity, but those positions evidenced rather defensive than offensive attitudes. In the opinions of other

A publication using results of the research of the third term of office of the Sejm was published in January 2001 by Wydawnictwo IFiS PAN.

⁴ Elections for the Sejm of the First Term of Office were free from the Contractual condition of 1989 and were carried out in line with democratic rules, similarly to elections to all subsequent parliaments in the years 1991-2005.

MPs of this first democratically elected term of office there were two prevailing trends: either perception of the process of integration with the Union as a game of zero sum, where only one party could benefit – and here the Union was more frequently indicated as a beneficiary of Poland's accession to the EU – and the other one, where integration process was interpreted as a momentous modernizing project of equal importance for Poland and for the entire, re-uniting European continent.

In the Sejm of the next term in office (1993-1997), dominated by the coalition of post-Communist parties (SLD – PSL) an officially expressed position of integration opponents was virtually absent. In the researched representation of MPs of that term of office, only a few persons formulated doubts whether it was reasonable to follow up with the integration goal. They mostly came from opposition (at that time) parties, which previously greatly contributed to overthrowing of the Communist system and setting on the road towards integration. During this term of office of the Sejm, the political communities that previously had been a part of the Communist regime, approved of the country's development concept closely linked to the integration project. The Europe Agreement entered into force and an application for Poland's accession to the European Union was filed during that term of office. It is worthwhile recalling that this was the time of promises of swift accession coming from almost all heads of EU member states, which helped identification with this project. Diversification around the integration axis that emerged, concerned not „for” or „against” membership in the Union as a priority of the government's policy, but only ways of its attainment. This diversification ensued rather from unequal resources of knowledge and differences in the understanding (and frequently from misunderstanding) of this process. This created a feeling of apparent consent for integration, which I defined at that time as shallow consensus, not rooted in the values that constituted the foundations of the integration project. Sartori⁵ identifies three spheres that are required for a permanent consensus around a given issue in politics. They include: the axiological sphere, consisting of the system of values and views, the procedural sphere, indicating the modality for reaching agreement and the third sphere, concerning agreement on the current government policy. On the threshold of the decisive stage on the road to membership, *i.e.* the stage of negotiating the membership conditions, the aforementioned shallow consensus was based solely on the third of the listed spheres – consent concerning the direction selected by the government and consisting in attainment by Poland of membership in the European Union.

⁵ G.Sartori, *Teoria demokracji (Theory of democracy)*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 1994.

The differences in the perceptions of the vision of the European Union in the negotiation and axiological sphere came into play with full force during the two subsequent terms of office of the Sejm of the Republic of Poland: the fourth one – when accession conditions were negotiated (1997-2001) and the fifth one (2001-2005), when the accession referendum was carried out, the Treaty was signed in Athens and Poland finally acceded to the European Union, but those events were accompanied by the debate on the Constitutional Treaty, which brought into light the axiological dimension of the integration project.

The stage of negotiating membership conditions in the years 1998-2003, apart from profound structural changes in state administration and local government administration, changes in legislation ensuing from the requirement to harmonize it with the *acquis communautaire*, was an important stage of deepening the knowledge on obligations pertaining to membership and of building the procedural sphere. The necessity to negotiate accession conditions both domestically and in Brussels was also conducive for those processes.. The necessity to shape negotiation procedures in internal relations (the forum of the Parliament – the public opinion – the media) and external relations (Polish Negotiators – European Commission) required deepening of the knowledge about functioning of the Union, its legal heritage, better than before understanding of the idea of unification. Despite difficulties encountered in reaching an agreement in subsequent 29 chapter and despite frequently brutal criticism expressed by the Negotiation Team, a decisive majority of MPs of the Sejm convening in the indicated period opted for maintenance of the pace of changes ensuing from the necessity to make adjustments to conditions set by the Union. This consolidation of more and more numerous and aware supporters of the accession was additionally strengthened by not very numerous but aggressive group of opponents of accession, who opted not just for slowing down of this process but its renouncement. Issues relating to membership were increasingly subjected to political instrumentalisation contributing to deepening of the information chaos and growth of social fears and vagueness of the set goal. Paradoxically, in that period – which brought to light the multitude and magnitude of the problems encountered by negotiators on the road to membership – a consensus deepened around the accession project both within a majority of political milieus and the public opinion. The final testimony of this consensus were results of the social referendum, where 77,8% of voters approved of Poland's accession to the Union.

And finally the last period (2001-2005) of the conclusion of negotiations and attainment of the member state status, which coincided with the debate on the Union's future both in the legal and organizational dimension and in the

axiological one. One can assume with great probability that the debate on the Constitutional Treaty in Poland and the vision of Union's future contained therein started as early as in the period preceding the Conference of autumn 2003. It concerned the following four postulates recommended by the Parliament to Polish delegation: making reference to Christian values in the Treaty's preamble, restoring the rule of calculating votes in the Council in line with the provisions adopted in the Nice Treaty, adopting the rule that each EU member state is represented by one Commissioner in the European Commission and adopting provisions precluding creation of internal coalitions within the Union. The National Parliament in Poland reached a consensus on those issues and further failures pertaining to ratification in other countries were not particularly surprising for the public opinion in Poland.

Enlivening of the debate accompanying preparations for ratification of the Constitutional Treaty in subsequent member states of the Union gave an opportunity for bringing into light of genuine – and not revealed previously – social concept of the sense, purpose and meaning of the project for uniting the European continent launched half century ago. It was a painful lesson of humility for political elites of the united Europe. The countries that just a year before completed an intense stage „of learning the Union” were in a relatively better situation than those that have never experienced the process of attainment of membership on a difficult and sometimes even painful road. In Poland, In the period preceding the planned referendum, despite a critical debate going on within political elites, a majority of voters were apt to approve the Treaty in the referendum. This was probably related more to a positive assessment of the first year of membership than to knowledge of this document.

Basing on analyses of the statements made by MPs along the process of shaping of the Parliamentary elite after 1989 in Poland, one can reconstruct two dominant trends in the way of sorting out the European space, bearing in mind that at different stages of this difficult process they surface with various intensity and it is impossible to attribute either of them to just one grouping of Polish political scene.⁶ Also analyses of political programs of the election campaign just coming to an end in Poland indicate permanence of the visions presented below. According to the first of them Europe is perceived as a horizontally structured configuration of civil societies with high co-operative potential; the other one perceives Europe as a vertical configuration of gradational interdependencies of ethnic communities with high dominance

⁶ W. Wesółowski (co-author), *The Significance of Preconceptions: Europe of Civil Societies and Europe of Nationalities* in: *Notions of Nationalism*, ed. S. Periwai, Budapest – London – New York 1995.

potential. These two polarities in visions of the European order are based on assumption of different criteria (economic, political, cultural ones), including diversification of relations between them and their various levels of their equilibrium. The level of this equilibrium defines Poland's position in Europe, *i.e.* its economic, political and cultural location, creating relationship of partnership, dominance or submission with the European environment.

The opinions of the MPs characteristic of the vision of Europe as an area of free cooperation of civil societies, is first and foremost accompanied by the feeling of the obviousness of the selected route of transformations towards the form of Western democracies and the rules of economic cooperation based on free market and free play of interests created in those democracies.

This generally outlined trend, however, falls within a quite broad spectrum of argumentation. The first of them was accompanied in the past by approval of *offensive and accelerated integration*, which after accession corresponds to approval of further „deepening”, „tightening” of relationships within the Union, which should eventually lead to setting up of a federation-like form of Union's organization. Currently politicians representing this vision are predominantly convinced that the Constitutional Treaty in its general outline should be ratified when Union's legal personality is recognized and – as a consequence – when a common defensive policy, currency, a president are established. A less radical – although falling under the horizontal vision of European order – attitude is assumed by politicians opting for such organization of the Union, where member states maintain control over those aspects of life of European nations that determine diversity of the continent. Here one particularly strongly stresses national autonomy in the area of science, culture, those values that are conditioned by specifics of the dominating religion and tradition. Carriers of those two visions are accordant so as to the general reason of the chosen road. This reason is an unquestionable approval for Poland's membership in the Union. Roots behind those reasons are slightly different: for the first ones they consist in taking advantage of the opportunity for accelerated modernization of the country and final eradication of the remnants of socialist backwardness, In the political, economic, cultural dimension. For the other ones this reason is first and foremost the obviousness imposed by the global logics of the world, including our, European culture and tradition. It is thought that in this circle the vast potential for dominance, with the tendency to subordinate the weaker to the more powerful is now giving way to a new order, based on the potential for cooperation of voluntary partners.

Those deputies who opted for the vision of a Europe of civil societies with strong co-operative potential showed a preponderance of pragmatic and economic and civilizational argumentation. Such opinions were frequently

voiced by those MPs who had economic educational backgrounds. In their statements (regardless of the degree of “enthusiasm” related to membership), reasons prevailed over emotions. One can assume that the perception of Europe presented above was accompanied by prospects of a society having all the prerequisites enabling in to meet requirements of a „co-operative” state, prepared to enter a partnership in the frames of Europe. In the other words this is a vision of a subjectivized, civil society consisting of individuals, professional groups and social strata, which compete with each other in attainment of better positions in the frames of the existing socio-economic system. This competition follows the principles meritocracy and is regulated not by means of devastating struggles (between individuals, social classes and social strata) but by means of negotiations. The principal, if not the supreme, goal of such negotiations is to achieve pragmatic co-operation. Adoption and legal sanctioning of this principle determines cooperative potential of a given society.

A different concept of the organisation of the European space and a different vision of the internal organisation of own society underlies the perception of Europe as a set of distinct ethnic communities. According to this conception, society is not a set of voluntarily co-operating individuals and groups but rather community, naturally related by ties of origin, tradition, culture, history. Nation-states are currently communities of this type. The interests of individuals and groups must be subordinated to protection of continuity and uniqueness of the community. The defence of common national interests has always priority over individual and particular interests. The individual or group who does not respect these tenets is perceived as alien, an outsider, “not us” and hence is a potential threat to the community. When the relationship between Poland and the „rest of Europe” is perceived like this, the issues of identity as well as political and military ones prevail over economic ones. Appeals to emotions prevail over appeals to reasons or economic pragmatism. Poland’s position in Europe thus structured is either perceived as a function of the „superiority” (moral, spiritual, military, cultural) of Poland and Poles or their relative „inferiority”. The dominance potential of the community is measured in terms of its ability to impose and enforce its supremacy or at least to defend itself against the dominance of others. The vision of Europe derived from this type of ideology (both in Poland and in societies of other member states) leads (more or less consciously) to challenging of the concept of European integration. Sources of the integration idea, which was formed after experiences of the WW II, is underlain by renouncement of the dominance rule in relations between nations for the benefit of cooperative collaboration.