

# Polish nationalism, history, and the EU membership

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**The European summit in Brussels in June 2007 was a very rare occasion for the Polish government and the leading opposition party to agree on a major political issue. The Polish delegation, led by President Lech Kaczynski, went to Brussels with the intention to fight over the voting system in the Council, to maintain a relatively strong position which Poland had had since the Nice Treaty, and which was to be changed should the Constitutional Treaty come into effect.**

The German Presidency of the EU wanted to establish an agenda for the intergovernmental conference, which, it was hoped, would prepare a new treaty and end the crisis in which the EU found itself after the French and Dutch referenda. Two member states were expected to create problems – the UK and Poland. There are several reasons why the current Polish right wing, conservative and nationalistic government has objections against the treaty. *Invocatio Dei* in the preamble, the new institution of the



Jaroslaw Kaczynski © European Community

EU foreign minister, reduction of the number of issues in which unanimity of vote would still be required, were among the most controversial issues. But it was the voting power in the Council, which proved to be the core of the matter. The Polish government, especially the Prime Minister Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the President's twin brother, and unquestionably the supreme leader of the Polish ruling coalition, long before the Brussels summit said that Poland would never accept a change in the distribution of votes in the Council which would weaken the Polish position.

The Constitutional Treaty proposes to replace the complicated and arbitrary system of Niece by a simple double majority, according to which the weight of each member state would be based on the size of its population. From the point of view of the development of the European democratic civil society, and taking into account the need to overcome the deficit of democracy in the EU, the double majority seems to be a perfect solution. It recognizes the fact that the EU is a union of sovereign states, but it also bases the strength of each state on the simplest, democratic principle. It emphasises the idea of the EU Europe as a social space, closer to citizens, and is a step towards a common European identity. Of course this means that smaller countries must accept that bigger neighbours have more to say in the EU decision-making process, proportionately to the difference in size of the populations. Nothing can be more simple. But not in Poland. For the Kaczynski's government and their Law and Justice (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) party Europe is not

seen as a common democratic social space, but as a union of sovereign states, and European political integration or a common European identity are certainly not a priority. The Polish government announced that they did not see any reason why Poland should have much less to say in Europe than other, bigger, states, especially Germany. As an alternative to the double majority, Poland proposed to distribute the voting power in the Council on the basis of the "square root" of the size of population, rather than its actual size. In this way the differences between member states would be diminished. Of course such a system would be less democratic, as the voice of some European citizens will be less significant than that of others, but the idea of Europe as a union of equal sovereign states would be strengthened.

It is, apparently, the fear of "German domination" of Europe, which determines the Polish position. Over 60 years after the end of World War II Poles still have deeply rooted anti-German sentiments, strengthened and confirmed by a particular interpretation of history, offered and imposed by the Polish education, and school text books. Some changes in the teaching of history were introduced after 1989, but Germany is still presented not only as one of the main (together with Russia), "significant other" in relation to whom Poles construct their national identity, but as a nation trying to dominate. Poles see themselves as victims of historical injustice and aggression of others, especially Germans and Russians. Therefore it is easy to generate anti-German and nationalistic sentiments by appealing to the mythologised historical memory. The Polish nationalism is based on the idea that Poland has always been attacked by enemies, mainly neighbours. This logic is still valid, and applied to relations with European partners and the EU. The Euro-sceptic leaders of *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* exploit anti-German fears in their attempt to build a public support for their sceptical European policy. According to it, Poland should achieve a position in the EU which would guarantee the ability to defend national interests. But Europe as such matters much less and European common interests and identity are hardly mentioned. The European Union is still "them", and not "us". Almost everybody in Poland talks about "our relation with the EU", as if Poland was not a member of the Union, but an outside partner. There is very little discussion about the kind of Europe Poles would like to be part of, except that Poland must be strong, and nobody should be allowed to intervene in Polish internal affairs. The political elites do not have an opinion on basic questions regarding the future of Europe, and they do not participate in the European debate, except when the Polish position in the balance of power is concerned. The one exception in which Polish conservative politicians discuss Europe is when they express concerns that Europe is secular and that Poland should contribute to the European future with religious, catholic values. But this idea of "evangelisation" of Europe is mostly heard from those members of the ruling coalition who, like the ultra-conservative party *Liga Polskich Rodzin* (League of Polish Families) are to the right even from *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*. The Kaczynski brothers are more pragmatic. For them the EU is seen as a source of funds, which may be used to develop the Polish economy. However, such a transfer of funds is not seen in Poland as part of a common European process of development, but as a compensation for the past misfortunes which affected Poland, and of which Western powers, especially Germany, are guilty. According to this logic, Poland deserves European financial solidarity, because Poles were fighting against communism and because they were victims of aggression. But Poland is under no obligation to reciprocate with solidarity in political matters. The "square root" system of calculating voting power in the Council is intended to enable Poland to block unwanted decisions. This issue of "blocking" has been particularly emphasized. It seems that Poland has no intention to contribute to the development of Europe. It just wants to block and to slow down the process of integration, to prevent the EU

from becoming anything more than an organisation of sovereign states. Polish national interests are the only thing that matters, as long as the European money keeps coming to the country.

This political logic of dealing with the EU is based on the deeply rooted historical prejudices and fears, essential to the Polish national identity, and therefore it appeals to very many Poles, especially those less educated, older, and with limited knowledge of the world. Therefore both the ruling coalition and the centre-right opposition support it, in order to gain approval of the electorate. The moderately conservative opposition (*Platforma Obywatelska* – Citizens Platform), which competes with the ruling coalition for the same electorate, fears that to oppose the nationalistic argument in the European debate would weaken its position. Only the centre-left opposition expressed a more pro-European view, warning against nationalism and pointing out that Poland needs to think more about common European future and not only about its particular national interests. It seems that the Polish Euro-sceptical policy is determined not just by the conservative and nationalistic views of the present government, but is rooted in the particular construction of Polish national-historical identity. Without a strong educational effort and a large-scale public debate on the meaning of Polishness and Europe, involving especially the young generation, more pro-European attitudes may be hard to achieve.