Western prejudices, Polish Fears

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Krysztof Pomian examines European attitudes towards Poland and Poland's attitudes towards the European Union. He uncovers startling similarities in the rhetoric used by the European Left and the Polish Right in their arguments against the enlargement.

When I started to prepare my talk on Poland in the West [1], I realized that something was wrong with the wording of my subject. For once, there is no such thing as the “West”. And there is no “Poland” either. I do not mean this in absolute terms. I mean only that as far as the attitude with respect to Poland is concerned, one cannot treat the “West”, whatever its geographic extension as an undifferentiated unity. And I mean moreover that the attitude with respect to Poland depends upon the Poland one has in mind. The Polish Republic as a state? Polish economy? Polish culture? Polish society? There are many Polands, so to say, and they do not automatically coincide with each other.

Furthermore, even if we agree to identify the West with the present-day members of the European Union, we note immediately each country has its own relation to Poland (whatever way we conceive it). I do not think that it is high on the agenda of the Netherlands or Portugal. But nobody would deny its importance for France and for Germany. For different reasons, Poland plays a significant role in their foreign policies, in their collective memories, and even in their self-consciousness. In the following I would like to look at French attitudes with respect to Poland.

Whoever is interested in French attitudes towards Poland has to start with the massive demographic fact of Polish immigration into France. According to statistics, there are today about a million French citizens who can trace back a Polish ancestor to the grandparents-level. In the majority, these ancestors were originally workers and peasants. They arrived in France at the end of the 19th and the early 20th century and were concentrated in the coal mining regions and in labour-consuming agriculture. At present, their descendants may be found everywhere and on all levels of social hierarchy. Usually their more or less distant Polish origins are for them not that important. But in periods of crises many of them feel somehow concerned with what happens with Poland or in Poland. This was manifest in the early 1980s and traces still persist.

For the French monarchy, Poland was an ally until the middle of the 18 century. Later
Poles, particularly Polish nobles, were a willing and courageous canon fodder for Napoleon. After 1815, Poland only played a marginal role in French foreign policy and after the defeat of 1870 it was sacrificed on the altar of the alliance with Russia. In the interwar period, France was more interested in the revival of Poland as an independent state in order to create a counter-weight to Germany and as a cordon sanitaire isolating Europe from the Soviet Union. At the same time, especially since Pilsudski’s seizure of power in May 1926, the French Left adopted a strong anti-Polish stance due to Polish anti-Semitism as well as its anti-Soviet policies, while an influential fraction of the French Right converted to a similar position because it aspired to establish peaceful, if not friendly relations with Nazi Germany. Nobody wanted mourir pour le Danzig.

There is a strong continuity of French policy towards Poland: it was and still is motivated by geopolitical considerations and not by sympathy or ideology. From that point of view, relations with Soviet Union were for France much more important than Poland’s fate. To this day, Russia occupies in French foreign policy a much greater place than Poland; it is easy to understand why. At one essential point however, French policy converged with Polish interests after the Second World War: Poland’s Western frontier on the Oder-Neisse line accepted by the Fourth Republic and later by de Gaulle and his successors, and defended by Mitterrand in the course of the German reunification. If Kohl resigned himself to finally accept this border, it was largely due to French pressures.

French public opinion towards Poland was sometimes not only different from, but even opposed to the policy of the French government. So it was after the November insurrection of 1830 and so it was during the period of Solidarity and particularly after the coup of General Jaruzelski. Poland still arouses sympathy in French catholic circles for its catholicism; a tradition that goes back to the times of Lamennais and Montalembert, i.e. to the first half of the 19th century. Democratic circles also sympathised with Poland’s struggle for freedom, also dating back to the period of Michelet.. Both traditions were revived during the years of Solidarity. The position of leftists and of socialists was much more variable; I mentioned already their anti-Polish stance between the two wars. After 1945, Communists were unconditional allies of the Soviet Union and of Communist Poland; Trotskyites who are more influential in France than elsewhere, took side with Polish workers revolts; and Socialists, torn between their attachment to democracy and their revolutionary rhetoric, or even ideology, tried to compensate their commitment to Realpolitik and to an electoral alliance with the Communists with lip services paid to the Polish dissenters. This past keeps some relevance to today’s choices.

As you see, the image of French attitudes with respect to Poland is not simple, despite its limitations to political attitudes which reduce Poland to the state and the society. The picture becomes even more complicated when we introduce attitudes towards Polish culture. Here, we have to differentiate between literature, music, visual arts, etc. All major Polish writers are translated into French but there is only one who succeeded to enter the mainstream of French literature so much so as to be considered a French writer honoris causa– Gombrowicz who has in literature the position equivalent to that of Lutoslawski, Penderecki and Gorecki in music. Polish visual arts are far less known with the only exception of theatre, particularly that of Grotowski and that of Kantor.
In the absence of any empirical study I dare not say to what extent some familiarity with the Polish culture contributes to create a presumption in favour of the entrance of Poland into the European Union, if it does it at all. What seems to me more certain is the connection between the refusal of such a prospect and the position one occupies on the spectrum of political opinions. Traditionally the forces opposed to the enlargement of the Union were located on both extremes of this spectrum: On the Right, among nationalists, who are in any case opposed to the European integration and on the Left in the Communist party and in some leftist groups who struggled against the project of a unified Europe. But today, when reading the press and listening to statements of politicians, one has the impression that it is the Left, which leads the struggle against the enlargement.

Even in the Socialist party, decidedly pro-European in the past, voices are audible that propose to postpone enlargement, in fact to abandon it. It is true that also French policy makers do not seem convinced that the enlargement of the European Union is favourable to French interests. They behave as if they accepted this prospect rather reluctantly, primarily because their German ally does not want to be on the Eastern frontier of the Union.

In other countries of the European Union governments seem to believe that the enlargement is good for their countries and that it must be implemented in 2004. The European Commission is also committed to this date, despite its criticisms of candidates about to enter the Union. Public opinion, however, and particularly its left-wing is more reserved, not only in France. German trade unions, Swedish ecologists, Flemish socialists and probably many other organizations in other countries express their doubts and their concerns about the future of the European Union after the enlargement. One is entitled therefore to speak in what follows of “Western” reactions to this prospect, meaning by that simply their simultaneous presence in several countries of the Union.

Now, I do not deny that there are many good reasons to feel uneasy at the prospect of a European Union composed of twenty-five member states. Nobody knows today how such an organization will work and whether it will work at all. And nobody knows how long a time will be required in order to bring the GNP per capita of newcomers closer to the average of the European Union. But these points are not the ones stressed most by Western defenders of the European status quo. They use other arguments, which seem to them more convincing for their constituencies. It happens that these arguments refer particularly to Poland, because it is the largest and most populous of the candidate countries and the one without which the enlargement is almost inconceivable. And also, because between some currents of the Western left and Poland lays an old ideological gulf which I alluded to before. In the 1980s, in the halcyon days of the Polish workers’ movement, this gulf seemed erased. Since 1989, it opened again and today it is probably as deep as it was between the two wars.

The arguments against the enlargement are seldomly expressed as squarely as I shall do in what follows. For the sake of clarity, I shall summarize them under four headlines without pretending that the list is complete.

The first concerns agriculture. It presumes that Poland’s entry into the Union with its important agricultural production obtained at much lower costs than in those countries, which already belong to it, will eventually ruin their producers of wheat, potatoes, sugar
beet, pork meat, etc. The second concerns industry. Allegedly, after the inclusion of Poland into the Schengen space, Polish work force will readily sell itself for next to nothing and will invade the Western labour market; provoking a fall of wages particularly in the building trade, public works and other sectors, which are looking primarily for unskilled workers. The ruin of agriculture and the collapse of the labour market are the two twin economic disasters that will presumably follow the enlargement of the European Union into Poland.

The third argument concerns ideology. It presumes that the Polish Catholicism is a threat to the secular character of the European Union and therefore to the peaceful coexistence of different Christian denominations and of Christianity with Judaism, Islam and other creeds. Coexistence, or so the argument goes, is possible only provided that the state is separated from the church, whatever the matter: politics and morals are to be consequently separated from religion. The fourth argument concerns politics. It states that Poland is much more attached to the United States than to the European Union and its entrance into the latter will be tantamount to the introduction of an American Trojan horse, which will cancel out the very possibility of a common European foreign- and military policy. As you see, the coming catastrophe of the European Union is not only of economic substance. What is suggested is that the European Union simply will not survive the enlargement and that all benefits of fifty years of European integration will be lost.

Due to constraints of space, it is impossible to make allowances in each case for the real difficulties and for phantasms. In any event, it would be useless. Suffice it to say, indeed, that the ruin of agriculture was already prophesised years ago as the unavoidable result of the admission of Spain into the Union and that it never materialized; and Poland is not producing wine. The vision of the labour market invaded by hordes of Polish workers is completely unrealistic and, moreover, it contradicts the calls coming often from the same groups to the effect that the immigration from outside Europe should be promoted to fill gaps created by the diminishing European birth rate. What is presented to us as economic arguments against the admission into the European Union of Poland, but in fact of all ten countries which apply, - turn out to be fallacies. The alleged ideological and political arguments are no better. Whatever opinion one shares on Polish Catholicism and on its influence on Polish politics, how can one imagine that one country among twenty-five will be able to modify the rules on which they agreed all together? And, regarding the American Trojan horse, suffice it to note that Great Britain is a member of the Union and that its weight in it is far greater than the one Poland may expect to play in any foreseeable future. I feel therefore entitled to dismiss all these supposed arguments as simple prejudices.

Now let me stop for a while at Polish fears. The subject is easier than that of the Western prejudices because the former are the mirror reflections of the latter with the Left replaced by the Right, particularly the extreme Right composed of Catholic fundamentalists and of some parts of the peasant movement, both having a propensity to anti-Semitism and xenophobia. The first of their fears is that of the unavoidable ruin of the Polish agriculture, unable to survive competition with the Western one, even if Polish peasants receive heavy European subsidies, and are otherwise condemned to a quick starvation. The second is that of the collapse of the Polish industry for the same reason, and the risk of much greater unemployment in the cities and the countryside than the
present, already unacceptable one. The third fear is that of the dissolution of the Polish Catholicism in the pernicious environment of the Western “civilisation of death” with its permissiveness, pornography, abortion and euthanasia – dissolution, which will result in the disappearance of the Polish national identity based as it is upon the unstirring fidelity of Poles to the Catholic Church. And the last is that of a political and military alliance which would not be led by the United States and which could even disagree with their policies. The catastrophic vision of the European Union after the enlargement insinuated in the West corresponds therefore in the Polish rightist media with the apocalyptic description of the material and spiritual death of Poland once it will become part of the Union.

If a note of irony in my presentation of Western prejudices and of Polish fears is audible, it was aimed at those who feed and propagate both of them and not at the real difficulties these emotions point to and of which I would not like to lessen the seriousness. Even among the six founders of the European Economic Community, the integration was not an absolutely smooth process without its sacrifices and its marginalized, if not rejected people. And no country entered the European Union without some fears having been expressed about the future of its economy and its identity. In Great Britain, the controversy is still raging between the Europhiles and the Europhobes. In France, where the similar controversy between Européistes and souverainistes is not closed, the Maastricht Treaty was ratified in a referendum only by a narrow margin. Denmark and Ireland are further examples of countries where the enlargement is not a given factor.

This is to say that questions about the future of the European Union are legitimate and that fears concerning the future of countries, which will enter into it, are legitimate. All the more, because politicians on both sides of the frontier, in what was probably their greatest sin against Europe, tried to make-believe after 1989 that the European Union was a land of plenty and that entrance into it will be easy and immediately rewarded. The disillusion was accordingly painful. It does not justify however these Western politicians and journalists, who in different countries of the European Union try to win acceptance for sheer prejudices as if they were established truths, and their counterparts in Poland and elsewhere, who provoke and maintain irrational fears. Both, Westerners and Poles, contend that they are defending social categories or nations whose basic interests and rights risk to be encroached by the enlargement of the European Union. Actually both are motivated first and foremost by their ideological commitments, respectively leftist and rightist. Taken together, they show that despite the apparently radical incompatibility of their fundamental choices, they have something in common.

This paper was already written when a friend pointed out to me that the last issue of the French monthly Le Monde diplomatique (nr 583, October 2002) contained (p. 17) an article on Poland: La Pologne malade du liberalisme [2] written by Mr. Bernard Margueritte former correspondent in Warsaw of Le Monde and Le Figaro. A friend who told me about also expressed her astonishment about Mr. Margueritte’s political stance. Le Monde diplomatique is indeed a Leftist journal, the most important Leftist journal in France, if not in Europe. Mr. Margueritte, however, was not known until now as a pillar of leftism. His article paints an apocalyptic image of Poland sold by its former leaders to forces of the market, split into a small wealthy elite and masses whose life becomes more intolerable every day, corrupted by Western influences, where the State is an obedient servant of enterprises and of the new nomenklatura, and where even the Church is not
what it used to be. And now I quote:

> What hope, therefore, one can cling to? The last fashionable myth is the entrance into the European Union, which will presumably solve all problems. But what can do in the Union a country in such a disarray? [...] All the same, the entrance into the Union of this bloodless Poland, may be for it a poisonous gift. Not only because it will create new problems, in particular for French peasants, but also because this country with its simplistic philo-Americanism wants to be a Trojan horse of Washington inside the Union.

And the article ends with the prospect of new revolt of Polish workers, which will succeed in establishing an economy founded on the respect for human rights and for social justice.

After heaving read the article, I reassured my friend. No, Mr. Marguerite did not turn leftist. He is still connected to the Polish Catholic Right and even to the extreme wing of it. But his rhetoric is a mix of leftist and rightist anti-liberalism and anti-Europeanism, of Western prejudices and of Polish fears. As such, it is a good illustration of the unholy alliance I tried to describe in this article.

**Footnotes**

1. This text is based upon a talk given at the conference "Poland in Europe" in Vienna in October 2002, organised by the Institute of Human Sciences.