

POLISH DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN UKRAINE

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Poland has been a strong supporter of Ukraine’s democratization since shortly after its own transition twenty-five years ago. Warsaw played a central role with its backing of democratic reformers during Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution. And, in the current crisis in Ukraine, with pro-Russia forces aligned against those who favor closer ties with the EU, Poland has positioned itself as perhaps the most ardent and committed proponent of Ukrainian democracy.

Poland’s deep commitment, distinctive democracy promotion expertise, and unique local knowledge and ties have allowed it to help secure some democratization gains in Ukraine in both 2004 and 2014. However, Poland’s efforts and their effectiveness in the long term have been hampered by two main factors. In some instances, the country relied heavily on its own experience, which has at times limited its democracy promotion approach in Ukraine. In addition, in its bilateral dealings and in its work through the EU, Poland has often had to juggle its interest in democracy promotion in Ukraine with a desire to ensure that Ukraine maintains its independence from Russia.

In sum, Poland’s support has helped to open two windows of democratic opportunity in Ukraine, but it has not yet been sufficient to push Ukraine in a definitively democratic direction.

THE EARLY POST-COMMUNIST PERIOD

Poland began supporting Ukraine’s democratization shortly after its own democratic breakthrough in 1989. This backing included diplomatic initiatives and aid for civil society development, local-level democracy, and state reform. In the early 1990s, Poland created multiple political forums for

cooperation, including channels through which to share transition experiences with Ukraine’s local and national governments and civil society organizations. By the late 1990s, Warsaw also began providing aid to these institutions.

By the mid-2000s, the Polish foreign ministry’s development arm, PolishAid, was supplying around \$700,000 a year in bilateral democratization aid to Ukraine. In total, Poland provided “roughly the equivalent of the democracy assistance to Ukraine of Sweden and the UK combined,” according to a 2008 assessment of European democracy aid.¹ This assistance to Ukraine, praised by many of its recipients, represented a larger proportion of Poland’s overall development aid than the proportion allocated by the United States for its democracy building in Ukraine.

For Poland, there was a lot at stake in Ukraine. Polish leaders believed, and continue to believe, that supporting the internal and external freedom of their Eastern neighbors—their democratization and sovereignty, respectively—would help foster stability and security. Containing the threat of Russian expansionism continued to be a top security and foreign policy objective, and pushing for democracy in the countries between Poland and Russia became central to the country’s Eastern strategy. As then Polish president Aleksander Kwaśniewski said of Ukraine in

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2002, “We are convinced that precisely here the important battle is being waged for the future of a secure, democratic Europe of the 21st century.”²

THE 2004 ORANGE REVOLUTION

Building on its early work, Warsaw played a crucial role in Ukraine’s 2004 Orange Revolution, in which mass protests against a rigged presidential election led to a revote and victory for the pro-democratic opposition. Kwaśniewski—a participant in the 1989 Polish roundtable negotiations that ended Communist rule—was invited by the parties to mediate the dispute in Ukraine. He also involved then EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, and then Lithuanian president, Valdas Adamkus, in the talks. Kwaśniewski developed a roundtable plan for Ukraine modeled on the 1989 Polish one. In part because of his local knowledge and ties, he was seen as the most effective international mediator at the Orange roundtable,³ which successfully ended the electoral crisis.

Kwaśniewski’s efforts were only one element of Poland’s support for Ukraine’s democracy advocates. Other prominent Polish political elites, including Lech Wałęsa, Bronisław Komorowski, and Lech Kaczyński, urged the Ukrainian regime to move in a democratic direction. Some Polish politicians and many Polish civic activists visited the opposition protests in Ukraine and organized demonstrations in Poland in solidarity with the Orange movement. Polish representatives also pushed the EU to speak out more forcefully in democracy’s favor. They achieved only limited success, however, in the form of a European Parliament resolution expressing support for democratic Ukraine’s European aspirations—but not for the country’s European integration ambitions.

THE POST-ORANGE REVOLUTION PERIOD

Despite Polish frustration with Ukraine’s troubled political path in the years following the Orange Revolution—“Ukrainians made excuses rather than [democratization] progress,”⁴ one Polish official said—Poland continued to provide diplomatic support and technical assistance for democracy. Even with Poland’s sustained interest in assisting Ukraine, however, Warsaw’s individual initiatives were sometimes too small to have an immediate impact or long-term consequences. Still, through its cumulative efforts Warsaw helped create a reservoir of pro-democratic elites and civil society activists who would eventually play a role in pressing for democratic change in 2014.

Over time, Polish democracy promotion efforts were increasingly focused on supporting Ukraine’s integration into the EU. Not only is Poland a believer in the power of the democratization carrots and sticks wielded by Brussels, but the global economic crisis that hit in the late 2000s also made it difficult for Poland to increase its level of development aid. When a more pro-EU government came to power in Poland, the country became more interested in and capable of asserting its national interests within the EU, including democracy promotion in Ukraine.

Poland and Sweden successfully advocated for the Eastern Partnership, an initiative dedicated to improving relations with—and promoting democracy in—the EU’s Eastern neighbors. The partnership has been criticized for not offering strong, timely incentives or sufficient aid to democratization front-runners such as Ukraine.⁵ To compensate for this, Poland actively pushed for enhancing the EU’s democracy aid, including in Ukraine, through the establishment of the European Endowment for Democracy. As a result, many Ukrainian recipients of Polish democracy promotion said in interviews in 2012 that Poland was the strongest supporter of Ukraine within the EU.⁶

In addition, Warsaw championed a 2011 European Parliament mission to Ukraine led by Kwaśniewski and former European Parliament president Pat Cox. They were tasked with addressing the issue of selective justice and finding a humanitarian solution to the case of imprisoned former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko.

However, Poland also engaged in a bilateral political dialogue with the regime of Viktor Yanukovich and pushed the case for signing an EU association agreement without waiting for Tymoshenko’s release—seeing this as necessary to divert incipient Russian involvement in Ukraine. Poland was thus more cautious than many EU member states about imposing conditions and applying diplomatic pressure on successive Ukrainian governments that failed to make democratic progress.

THE EUROMAIDAN MOVEMENT

In late 2013, many Polish politicians and civic activists visited the Euromaidan protests and organized campaigns in Poland in support of the movement, such as “Light a Candle for Ukraine” and a solidarity letter-writing marathon. The Polish state and several Polish foundations sent financial and humanitarian aid to supply victims of Kyiv’s winter clashes with medicine, clothing, and food. Other organizations provided legal aid and publicity regarding cases of abuse of power by the Ukrainian regime against its citizens.

Concerned about the nationalist mobilization around the Euro-aidan and in line with its earlier emphasis on Ukraine's EU integration, Warsaw sought to respond primarily in tandem with other EU members, but also to enlist more European "heavy hitters" than were involved in 2004.

But again, Warsaw based many of its efforts on its own transition experience, rather than building on its local knowledge and innovating in response to the situation in Ukraine. Poland insisted on a "negotiated transition," even though such an approach had failed to produce a lasting impetus for democratization in 2004. Some Polish politicians criticized the Euromaidan movement for failing to begin a dialogue with members of the former regime early on in order to pave the way for a peaceful transition—an echo of Poland's roundtable experience. Consequently, in December 2013, the Cox-Kwaśniewski mission returned to Ukraine to mediate between protesters and the regime.

In January 2014, then Polish prime minister Donald Tusk and then foreign minister Radosław Sikorski launched talks with the European Commission president, José Manuel Barroso, and a number of other Western and Eastern European leaders in an attempt to orchestrate a united and decisive European response to the window of democratic opportunity. As the crisis in Ukraine deepened, Warsaw supported the notion of EU sanctions targeting key members of the regime.

The Polish government also worked hard to get Germany and France fully engaged in seeking a resolution to the crisis. On February 19, 2014, Sikorski, together with his German and French counterparts, began mediating between the Euromaidan movement and Yanukovich. These negotiations concluded successfully, with the Ukrainian president agreeing to early elections, a new interim government, and constitutional changes. As in 2004, Warsaw's crucial role was reported in the international media and acknowledged by Ukrainian and European political leaders. But a peaceful transition was not ensured.

When Russia annexed Crimea in March 2014 and began actively seeking to destabilize eastern Ukraine, the focus of Polish policy shifted to preserving the territorial integrity of its neighbor. In an effort to arrest Russian expansionism, the Polish government prioritized shoring up the newly elected Ukrainian president, Petro Poroshenko, even though he had delayed the introduction of key reforms. Given his commitment to pushing back against Russia, the Polish government has not put much pressure on his administration to make democratization progress for fear of undermining his efforts to stabilize Ukraine. In this instance,

again, Poland's desire to ensure that Ukraine maintains its independence from Russia undermined the consistency of Warsaw's democratization efforts in Ukraine.

Warsaw has also pushed the EU and the IMF to release quick and generous support to the new Ukrainian regime, arguing that such aid is essential to securing the country's independence from Russia. Poland has actively lobbied the EU and NATO to ensure Ukraine's territorial integrity and to adopt tough stances on Russia. Warsaw's relatively hawkish stance vis-à-vis Russia had ordinarily made it difficult for Poland to find allies among more dovish Western European powers. But in late July 2014, Poland (with the support of the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, and the Baltic states) finally succeeded in convincing the rest of the EU member states to begin putting in place a number of targeted economic sanctions against Russia. Poland's influence over an initially hesitant German policy has been of particular significance.

MERITS AND LIMITATIONS

Poland's efforts in Ukraine have had several distinctive merits. First, its own recent transition provides it with what one Ukrainian activist called "fresh memories, emotions, and results to share."⁷ This experience also makes the Polish democracy promoters moral authorities and experts in the eyes of many of their Ukrainian recipients. Second, given the shared Polish-Ukrainian history, Poland also has close, valuable ties to local actors and extensive knowledge of the sociopolitical realities in Ukraine, which have helped Warsaw make a difference. Third, Poland's strong and sustained commitment to Ukraine's democratization is clear to many Ukrainian counterparts. As one Ukrainian diplomat explained, that relationship helps its efforts to be "accepted by many Ukrainians in both political camps," and gives them "a practical visibility and substance that are lacking in the activities of many Western donors."⁸

Given these strengths, Poland's efforts have been important in shaping the expectations of elites and ordinary citizens and making it possible to broach sensitive issues such as regime change. As one Ukrainian aid recipient noted, Polish democracy promotion has helped "change our minds about many issues" because "we see with our own eyes that change is possible."⁹

In addition, Polish democracy promotion has been able to penetrate both the Ukrainian elite and society. In a 2013 survey, most Ukrainian civic and political elites ranked Poland as the second most active democracy promoter in Ukraine (after the United States); among ordinary Ukrainians, Poland was ranked

as the most active.¹⁰ Just under one-half of all international cooperation programs involving Ukrainian civil society are with Poland, according to Ukrainians involved in the projects.¹¹ More than one-fifth of all Ukrainian municipalities are involved in some cooperation with their Polish counterparts.¹²

Despite the scope of Poland's democracy promotion efforts, however, many Ukrainian recipients point to Warsaw's limited financial and human capacity as a democracy promoter as its most serious weakness. As one of these recipients explained, most Polish initiatives are usually "small and short, [making it] hard for individual projects to really count."¹³ Therefore, despite its high visibility and steady commitment, Poland has yet to invest in Ukraine's democratization on a scale that would make its successes more than short lived.

In addition, the fact that Warsaw has largely based its democracy promotion efforts on Poland's own experience has at times limited the diversity, originality, and fit of its undertakings in Ukraine.

Finally, like many Western donors, Poland has made democracy promotion in Ukraine secondary to other foreign policy objectives, especially trying to pull Ukraine out of Russia's sphere of influence. Some Ukrainian recipients of Polish aid complained that Poland has provided unconditional support for Ukraine's pro-Western governments, even when they make insufficient progress on reforms. Poland has also tended to play the role of the "good cop" with all Ukrainian administrations, even the most illiberal ones, some aid recipients said, in order to maintain open communications and influence with them.

CONCLUSION

By leveraging its advantages as a democracy promoter and its EU membership, Warsaw has helped to create windows of democratic opportunity in Ukraine. However, given Poland's limited capacity

and tendency to rely primarily on its own democratization model, Warsaw's support has not been sufficient to help sustain Ukraine's democratization or to address the structural obstacles to it. Moreover, because Poland's efforts have been colored by Ukraine's relations with Russia, Warsaw has found it difficult to embed its approach within the EU in a meaningful way that would take advantage of the EU's greater democracy promotion capacity.

Poland will continue to play a vital role in Ukraine, both through its own national initiatives and in galvanizing other EU member states. As relations with Russia become more fraught, however, Poland will again need to strike a difficult balance between pushing for democratic reform in Ukraine, on the one hand, and a geopolitical response to Moscow, on the other. In addition, Poland will continue to face a trade-off between relying on the tested democratization best practices from its own history and building on its local knowledge and ties to innovate in response to Ukraine's evolving struggle for democracy.

NOTES

- 1 Jacek Kucharczyk and Jeff Lovitt, eds., *Democracy's New Champions: European Democracy Assistance After EU Enlargement* (Prague: PASOS, 2008), 21.
- 2 Aleksander Kwasniewski, address delivered during the opening of the conference "Ukraine in Europe," Warsaw, October 15, 2002.
- 3 Steven Pifer, "European Mediators and Ukraine's Orange Revolution," *Problems of Post-Communism*, 54, no. 6 (November/December 2007): 28–42.
- 4 Interview, Polish foreign policy maker, March 2013.
- 5 Natalia Shapovalova, "The EU's Eastern Partnership: Still-Born?" Policy Brief no. 11 (Madrid: FRIDE, May 2009).
- 6 Interview, Ukrainian policymaker, February 2012.
- 7 Interview, Ukrainian activist, February 2013.
- 8 Interview, Ukrainian diplomat, April 2013.
- 9 Interview, Ukrainian policymaker, January 2013.
- 10 Tsveta Petrova, *From Solidarity to Geopolitics: Support for Democracy Among Postcommunist States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
- 11 Interview, Ukrainian activist, February 2013.
- 12 Interview, Ukrainian activist, March 2013.
- 13 Interview, Ukrainian policymaker, February 2013.

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