



---

November 2002

## THE POLITICAL CONTEXT OF EU ACCESSION IN POLAND

*Aleks Szczerbiak*



---

### Introduction

---

The notion of 'returning to Europe' has been one of the leitmotifs of Polish politics since the collapse of communism in 1989. In political terms this was understood to refer to the development of liberal democracy, in economic terms the emergence of capitalist market economies, and in terms of international relations the reorientation of foreign policy aimed at integrating these countries into Western international structures and organizations. As the focus for the successful postwar West European political and economic integration, the EU was, along with NATO, the central international and regional organization that post-communist Poland wanted to join.

This paper examines the political context within which Polish EU accession is located. It begins by examining the broad progress of the political and economic transition before moving on to consider how Polish–EU relations have evolved in the post-communist period, particularly focusing on the progress of the accession process and key issues in the negotiating endgame. The next section considers the attitudes towards EU accession of the six main political parties and groupings that emerged following the September 2001 parliamentary election. The paper concludes by examining and accounting for the evolution of Polish public opinion on EU accession and the prospects for the forthcoming EU membership referendum.

---

TABLE 1: SEPTEMBER 2001 POLISH PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION RESULTS

Party	Votes (%)	Seats
Democratic Left Alliance-Labour Union (SLD-UP)	41.04	216
Civic Platform (PO)	12.68	65
Self-Defence (Samobrona)	10.20	534
Law and Justice (PIS)	9.50	44
Polish Peasant Party (PSL)	8.98	42
League of Polish Families (LPR)	7.87	38

Source: Polish State Electoral Commission.

the Freedom Union (UW), led by a relatively unknown trade union expert, Jerzy Buzek.

However, although it proceeded to serve out its full four-year parliamentary term, by the time it left office in September 2001 the Buzek

government was

### The political and economic context

Following the collapse of communism and re-emergence of pluralist politics in 1989, Poland has evolved into a stable and increasingly consolidated capitalist liberal democracy. This does not mean that the last thirteen years have not seen periods of considerable political instability, polarization and economic dislocation. Nevertheless, overall the political and economic transition in Poland remains broadly 'on track', and patterns of politics and the structure of the economy are both converging with and increasingly resembling those to be found in the West.

In political terms, between 1989 and 1993 Poland was run by the various parties and groupings that emerged from the Solidarity opposition movement which had precipitated the demise of the communist system following its overwhelming victory in the partially free elections of May–June 1989. However, Solidarity was always an ideologically heterogeneous political construct and rapidly proceeded to fragment and disintegrate during this period. This process culminated in the overwhelming victory of the ex-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD) and the former communist satellite Polish Peasant Party (PSL) in the September 1993 parliamentary election. The former communists' political comeback was completed by the narrow victory of their leader, Aleksander Kwasniewski, over the legendary Solidarity leader Lech Walesa in the November–December 1995 presidential election. The SLD's electoral successes intensified and deepened the polarization of the Polish political scene around attitudes towards the communist past. It also encouraged the numerous parties and groupings on the post-Solidarity centre-right to bury their differences and form the Solidarity Electoral Action grouping (AWS) in which the Solidarity trade union played a hegemonic role. Subsequently, AWS went on to win the September 1997 parliamentary election and form a government with a liberal post-Solidarity party,

deeply unpopular and discredited, and perceived to be incompetent and divided, not least over European issues (see below).<sup>1</sup> The SLD, on the other hand, successfully portrayed itself as an effective opposition and (unlike AWS, which remained a loose coalition) transformed itself into a single and more coherent unitary political party under the leadership of the tough and pragmatic former communist apparatchik Leszek Miller.

Consequently, the SLD was returned to office following its victory in the September 2001 election and Miller assumed the premiership (see Table 1).

However, the SLD did not succeed in securing the parliamentary majority that it had hoped for and that all the opinion polls had predicted it would get. It was thus forced to form a coalition government, once again with the PSL. This was to have important implications in a number of policy areas, not least Poland–EU relations.

Generally, though, the story is one of increasing political stability exemplified by the fact that, notwithstanding numerous coalition disputes (extremely sharp ones in the case of the AWS–UW government) both the 1993–97 and 1997–2001 parliaments ran their full terms. This increasing stability could also be seen in the fall in the number of parties and groupings represented in parliament. This number fell from 29 after the first fully free 1991 parliamentary election to just six in 1993, five in 1997 and then six again in 2001 (not including the geographically concentrated German minority, which has special provisions that ensure it is represented by a couple of deputies). Poland now also has a stable set of political institutions. Since the accession of Aleksander Kwasniewski to the presidency in 1995 and the passage of the 1997 Constitution, an increasingly workable separation of powers has emerged between executive and legislative branches. This is underpinned by the fact that it is now much more difficult to remove an incumbent government (for which a 'constructive vote of no confidence' is required) or dissolve parliament.

At the same time, economic policy formation has remained relatively insulated from any political turbulence. Poland was the pioneer of post-communist economic reform, following the introduction of Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz's radical macro-economic stabilization and economic liberalization package in January 1990. The so-called 'Balcerowicz Plan' was to become the template for the kind of radical economic reforms that many commentators associated with the term 'shock therapy'. The Balcerowicz Plan led to a stabilization of Poland's dire economy, the restoration of equilibrium in public finances, the proper functioning of the price mechanism and further emergence of a vigorous private sector (a process that was already beginning towards the end of the communist period). However, the broader social and economic benefits of this were much less tangible and slower to materialize than the reformers had hoped for, with inflation remaining stubbornly high and the economy moving into a sharp downturn. At the same time, there were significant social consequences of economic reform, in the form of a substantial increase in unemployment, fall in real incomes and increase in inequality-relative poverty.

These came as a considerable shock to a society that had become used to the full employment and relative security guaranteed by the communist regime (albeit at the cost of a bankrupt and dysfunctional economy and unsustainable foreign credits). The painful social costs of economic transformation contributed towards a rapid loss of support for, and exacerbated tensions within, the Solidarity governments and, in part at least, help to explain the victory of the SLD and PSL in the 1993 election.

In fact, the Polish economy had already begun to recover by 1992 and the SLD-PSL government was to preside over one of the fastest growing economies in Europe in the mid-1990s, with growth peaking at 7 per cent in 1996. Indeed, in spite of its sharp rhetoric criticizing the Balcerowicz Plan, the SLD-PSL government continued with the main tenets of economic reform and Finance Minister Grzegorz Kolodko's 'Strategy for Poland', the centre-piece of its economic programme, represented basic continuity in terms of the main lines of policy. The government was, however, criticized by economic liberals for failing to deepen structural reforms or use economic growth to lay the basis for cuts in taxation and longer-term fiscal stability. By the time Balcerowicz returned to the Finance Ministry as leader of the UW in 1997 and attempted to introduce a second wave of fiscal reforms, economic growth had already slowed down, falling to just over 1 per cent in 2001. At the same time unemployment, which had remained stubbornly high even during its trough during the periods of economic

growth, began to increase steadily and remained stuck at around 18 per cent (for which many liberal economists blamed Poland's relatively rigid and inflexible labour market). The AWS-UW government's ambitious programme of social reforms in the fields of local government, health, education and pensions also proved to be extremely costly (as well as unpopular).

Thus, by the time, the SLD-PSL regained office in 2001 its top priority was avoiding a fiscal crisis. The large tax increases and expenditure cuts introduced in its first budget meant that the new government enjoyed virtually no political honeymoon and saw an unusually sharp downturn in its approval ratings. Nevertheless, although the Polish economy did not develop into the kind of 'Tiger economy' that many of the more optimistic Polish commentators were forecasting in the 1990s, and further structural and labour market reforms are still required, the Polish economy has made good progress over the last decade. It is forecast to resume a more vigorous growth rate of 3 per cent in 2002.

---

### Polish foreign policy and Polish-EU relations

---

The collapse of the Soviet bloc in 1989-91 naturally led to a complete reorientation of Polish foreign policy. Together with the development of friendly relations with its neighbours, integration into Western political, economic and structure structures, specifically the EU and NATO, became Poland's top priority. This was encompassed in the rather amorphous general aspiration of 'returning to Europe', underpinned by the idea that Poland had always belonged spiritually and culturally to the West. Full membership of NATO was finally achieved in March 1999 when the Czech Republic, Poland and Hungary became the first post-communist states to join the enlarged security pact.

However, EU accession was to prove a much more protracted process, inevitably so given the complexity of the *acquis communautaire* and the wide structural disparities between Poland (and other post-communist applicant states) and existing EU member states. Along with other post-communist states, Poland signed an association pact with the EU, known as a Europe Agreement, in 1991. The SLD-PSL government, at the time led by PSL premier Waldemar Pawlak, submitted an application for full EU membership in 1994 and, following the decisions of the 1997 EU Luxembourg summit, the AWS-led Buzek government formally began accession negotiations in March 1998. Poland made reasonable progress in the negotiations, although it tended to find itself in the middle of the group of twelve candidate states in terms of

negotiating 'chapters' closed. Indeed, as the negotiations wore on, a perception began to set in (whether justified or not) that Poland was 'falling behind' relative to other candidate states such as Estonia, Hungary and Slovenia. This was partly due to inescapable objective factors. As the largest by far of the twelve applicant states, Poland was always going to be one of the most difficult for the EU to accommodate. In particular, it had a sizeable and backward agricultural sector in which nearly a quarter of the population claimed to be employed. The full and immediate extension of all the provisions of the Common Agricultural Policy to encompass the Polish agricultural sector would involve a substantial (and politically unacceptable) increase in the EU budget.

However, there were other, more avoidable reasons why the early stages of the EU negotiations proved to be quite problematic. At one stage, for example, it became increasingly difficult for the Polish parliament to transpose the *acquis communautaire* into Polish law, and a large legislative backlog developed. This problem was resolved in 1999 by the establishment of a special parliamentary committee to 'fast-track' large swathes of EU-related legislation through the legislative process. However, the issue reflected more general anxieties, which found expression in the regular Commission progress reports, that Poland lacked the broader administrative capacity to ensure the proper implementation of EU norms.

A more significant (and avoidable) problem was the internal difficulties of the Buzek government. The government was not only a coalition between two political formations; AWS itself was a broad and rather amorphous ideological and organizational construct. In addition to the trade unionists that provided its organizational core, it included liberal-conservatives, Christian democrats and, significantly, a sizeable Catholic-nationalist faction clustered around the Christian National Union (ZChN) on which the government was dependent for its parliamentary majority. The ZChN was a Eurosceptic party (although its explicitly anti-EU faction broke away to form the Polish Agreement [PP] grouping in 1999) that posited a whole series of conditions and reservations about EU membership and the Union's future trajectory. In order to accommodate the ZChN's misgivings, the Buzek government had to portray itself as adopting a 'tough' negotiating strategy that led to the emergence of tensions between the Polish government and the EU negotiators. This subsided somewhat when ZChN deputy Ryszard Czarnecki was removed from the influential post of Secretary of the Committee for European Integration in 1999. However, ZChN-inspired rhetoric continued to set the tone for much of the AWS political discourse on European issues and it continued to portray itself as a 'tough' defender of

Polish national interests. This was exemplified by the government's uncompromising policy of seeking an eighteen-year transition period during which restrictions could be placed on the sale of Polish land to foreigners (the EU's offer, accepted by most of the candidate states, was a seven-year transition period).

The tough stance was adopted in part because the 'religious right' electorate clustered around the fundamentalist Catholic-nationalist (and anti-EU) radio station Radio Maryja remained an important element of AWS's political base. But it also formed an element of AWS's broader political strategy of attempting to distinguish itself from the allegedly 'softer' and more accommodating approach to defending national interests adopted by the SLD. This was particularly evident in the early stages of AWS leader Marian Krzaklewski's October 2000 presidential election campaign. However, the strategy was not pursued consistently and Krzaklewski gave it little prominence during the later stages of the campaign, mainly due to the fact that it had clearly found little resonance among AWS's broadly pro-EU electorate. Moreover, in spite of these Eurosceptic genuflections, the Buzek government remained strongly committed to the major foreign policy objective of securing Polish EU membership, at least rhetorically at the earliest possible date.

Following its September 2001 parliamentary election victory, an SLD-led government came to office with a pledge to speed up accession negotiations. The new government quickly stamped its mark on EU policy by replacing the Chief EU Negotiator and centralizing the coordination of EU policy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>2</sup> Even more significantly, the government adopted a new, more flexible negotiating strategy in November 2001. This was exemplified by the decision to soften the negotiating stance by accepting a shorter, twelve-year, transition period on the sale of land to foreigners (three years in the case of existing foreign leaseholders and zero in that of purchases for investment purposes) and the EU's proposal to restrict Polish access to Western labour markets by up to seven years. Although this sparked significant domestic political controversy in the new parliament, in which Eurosceptics were strongly represented (see below), it did considerably speed up the progress of accession negotiations and by the summer of 2002 Poland had joined the leading group of countries in terms of negotiating chapters closed.

In spite of this, as Poland approaches the negotiating endgame there are a number of crucial problem areas still to be resolved (or that may lie dormant as possible future problems). These are exacerbated by the fact that the SLD failed in its objective to achieve an overall parliamentary majority and was forced to govern in coalition with the PSL,

with the party's leader, Jaroslaw Kalinowski, occupying the important position of Deputy Premier and Agriculture Minister. The PSL's position (discussed in more detail below) is considerably less enthusiastic about the EU than the SLD. It has constrained the government's room for manoeuvre, particularly on agricultural issues, and is likely to continue to do so.

There are four main problematic areas in Polish–EU relations.

### 1. The EU budget and regional aid

These two issues are linked because although Poland will have to make contributions to the EU budget immediately it will take some time for it to become a full beneficiary of regional aid. This is partly because all aid projects must be based on matching funding that may not be found very easily. Polish experience of pre-accession funds such as PHARE and SAPARD is not encouraging in this respect. At the same time, the Polish government has made it a non-negotiable condition of its negotiating stance that Poland cannot be a net EU budget contributor in the early years of its membership. This is extremely unlikely; what is more likely is that Poland will derive only relatively small benefits in terms of transfers from the EU in the first few years after accession. This will, obviously, make it more difficult to 'sell' Polish membership to the Polish public and mean that Poland could adopt a fairly truculent attitude in the next budget round.

### 2. Agriculture

The other major negotiating chapter that it will be extremely difficult for Poland to accept is that relating to agriculture. This is particularly the case in relation to the subsidies or 'direct payments' to be received by Polish farmers (although disputes over the base year for agricultural quotas and phyto-sanitary standards are also significant contested issues covered by this chapter). The EU's proposal set out in January 2002 (not yet agreed by the member states) is that farmers in candidate states should receive only 25 per cent of the level of direct payments paid to farmers in existing member states. This should be gradually increased to 100 per cent within ten years. The Polish government has taken an extremely tough line on this issue and its room for manoeuvre is limited. This is both because of the importance of this issue to so many Polish citizens (given the structure of the Polish economy, noted above) and, more directly, because the agrarian PSL is one of the two government coalition partners. It is very difficult to see the Commission, for its part, proposing a significantly improved offer, particularly as some current member states, which want more fundamental CAP reform that would abolish all direct payments, consider the Commission's position to be too generous already.

### 3. Competition policy

Apart from the budget, agriculture and regional aid, the Polish government has been able to close most of the difficult negotiating chapters in areas such as free movement of labour and capital, the environment, and justice and home affairs by agreeing to a series of transition periods. One chapter that still remains problematic as the endgame nears, however, is competition policy. There are two issues at stake here. First, the Commission has reservations about the Polish government's proposals to restructure its loss-making steel industry to make it less dependent on government subsidies. Secondly, the Commission continues to express doubts about the compatibility of the so-called Special Economic Zones (where companies enjoy a range of tax incentives) with the provisions of the Single Market.

### 4. Sale of land to foreigners

Ostensibly this issue has been resolved with the already noted mutual concessions made by the Polish government and the EU, and the closing of the chapter on free movement of capital. However, one of the reasons why PSL Agriculture Minister Kalinowski was able to 'sell' this concession to his party and voters was his promise to introduce a 'law on the turnover of Polish land'. This would *de facto* restrict the sale of Polish farm land to foreigners by, for example, introducing language requirements or giving the first right of purchase to neighbours. Parliament has not even begun debating this law and it is unlikely to be enacted before the end of 2002, so it is unlikely to impinge on the accession negotiations. However, such a law could be deemed contrary to the Internal Market provisions and, perhaps, provide an early case for referral by the Commission to the European Court of Justice.

---

## Party attitudes towards EU accession

---

As noted above, following a period of extreme fragmentation, the Polish party system began to be consolidated in the mid-1990s. Indeed, following the September 1997 parliamentary election the political scene appeared to be crystallizing around four parties and groupings clustered around two axes. There were two larger electoral conglomerates: the post-Solidarity centre-right AWS and the centre-left SLD, based on the heirs of their erstwhile communist opponents. The main left-right axis was defined primarily in terms of the differing attitudes of these two groupings (and their voters) towards the communist past and moral-cultural issues, particularly the role of the Catholic Church in public life. Otherwise, both groupings were

electorally heterogeneous, with broadly similar socio-economic programmes, and both fluctuated around the 25–35 per cent mark in the opinion polls. At the same time, there were two medium-sized political parties: the liberal post-Solidarity UW and the agrarian-populist PSL that formed as the organizational successor to the former communist satellite Peasant Party. Both parties were 'centrist' in the Polish sense but divided on the more conventional left–right axis in terms of their attitudes towards socio-economic issues, and they had much more clearly defined electorates. The UW's support was concentrated among young, urban and well-educated 'transition winners' and the professional and public-sector intelligentsia, while the PSL's electorate was predominantly rural and based primarily on the one-quarter of Polish voters employed in agriculture (mainly as peasant smallholders). These two parties' levels of support ranged between 5 and 15 per cent and they were roughly equal contenders for the mantle of 'third force'.

However, the September 2001 election shattered this emerging order and produced an asymmetrical and, on the centre-right, at least, unstable party configuration that is still in the process of crystallizing. As expected, the SLD, in coalition with the smaller Labour Union (UP) party, emerged as the largest grouping in parliament, although it fell short of achieving an absolute majority and was forced to form a coalition government with the PSL. Both the government groupings from the previous parliament, AWS and the UW, failed to cross the threshold of votes required to secure parliamentary representation (5 per cent for parties, 8 per cent for electoral coalitions). Instead two new centre-right groupings, the Civic Platform (PO) and Law and Justice (PiS) parties, entered parliament as medium-sized formations. By far the biggest surprise, however, was the entry into parliament of two radical-populist groupings: the agrarian Self-Defence party, which emerged as the new 'third force' in Polish politics, and the Catholic-nationalist League of Polish Families (LPR).

As discussed in more detail below, both of the latter groupings adopted a highly critical (if not outright hostile) approach towards the EU. Indeed, their success, together with that of the EU-critical PSL and PiS parties, led some commentators to interpret the 2001 Polish election as representing a 'Eurosceptic backlash'. However, this was not an accurate interpretation of the election outcome. The EU issue actually had very little salience during the campaign. Most parties devoted very little time to it in their campaigning (Self-Defence said virtually nothing about it in its TV campaign) and very few voters cited it as a major issue. Indeed, the supporters of all of these parties, except for the LPR but including Self-Defence, were broadly in favour of EU membership. Moreover, the two most

successful groupings (SLD-UP and the PO) were also the most pro-EU and in the new parliament there remains a clear majority supportive of Polish EU membership. What is more significant is that since the September 2001 election Eurosceptic parties have had an important new platform to air their views. This has given them an opportunity to put the broadly pro-EU opposition parties such as the PO and PiS as well as the PSL in an awkward position and has, to some extent, set the tone for the initial (extremely critical) parliamentary reaction to the new government's negotiating strategy. The presence of this sizeable Eurosceptic bloc in parliament will obviously have implications in the run-up to the accession referendum (discussed below) and is likely to continue to do so if and when Poland becomes an EU member.

The rest of this section examines in more detail the approaches towards the EU of each of the six main parties and groupings represented in parliament. It should be noted at the outset that there is a strong likelihood that the Polish party system will undergo a period of considerable upheaval over the next few years, particularly on the centre-right. Indeed, with the exception of the SLD and (probably) the PSL, it is likely that all of the four groupings currently represented in parliament will be quite volatile and could transform, split, merge (some of them already have) or simply fail to be re-elected. In other words, they represent the 'raw material' for the Polish political scene rather than the finished product.

One overall comment in relation to Polish parties' attitudes towards Europe is that they have paid very little attention to the future trajectory and the kind of EU of which they want Poland to be a member.<sup>3</sup> Most party statements on the EU and European integration have focused on the detail of the accession negotiations, particularly criticisms of other parties' approaches to them. In fact, parties have tended to view the accession process in large part through the prism of domestic politics. This is, perhaps, inevitable given that domestic politics is at the top of the political agenda at the moment. Nevertheless, it does make it extremely difficult to predict how Poland will contribute to future debates once it is in the EU member and, therefore, what kind of a contribution it will make to the EU's future development.

### *Democratic Left Alliance (SLD)*

The SLD was formed in the run-up to the 1991 parliamentary election as a conglomerate of twenty political and social organizations with their roots in the previous system. However, from the outset, the hegemonic role within this grouping was always played by the Social Democracy of the Republic of Poland (SdRP) grouping. SdRP was formed in January 1990 as the direct organizational successor to the

former communist Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR).

The other major component of the SLD was the All-Poland Agreement of Trade Unions (OPZZ) that was established in 1984 as an officially sanctioned trade union federation under the communist system. As noted above, the SLD won the 1993 parliamentary election and its leader, Aleksander Kwasniewski, was elected President of the Republic of Poland in 1995 (Kwasniewski currently enjoys a 70 per cent approval rating, the highest of any Polish politician, and was easily re-elected in 2000). In spite of increasing its share of the vote, the SLD lost the 1997 election to AWS.

However, the new party leader, Leszek Miller, proved an effective opposition leader and transformed the SLD into a unitary political party in 1999. Having successfully exploited the AWS-led government's weaknesses, the SLD went on to win the 2001 parliamentary election with a record 41.04 per cent of the vote and 216 seats, but it fell 15 seats short of winning a parliamentary majority.

SLD is a strongly pro-EU party. It criticized the Buzek government for its ineffective approach to the EU accession negotiations and fought the 2001 election on a pledge to speed them up that it fulfilled almost immediately. There are two reasons why the SLD is likely to remain staunchly pro-EU for the foreseeable future. First, strong support for European integration is a vital element in projecting an image of the SLD as a modernized Western-style social democratic party and thereby allowing it to distance itself from its communist past. For example, from a very early stage SdRP and SLD leaders placed great importance on their acceptance into international social democratic organizations and on contacts with foreign social democratic leaders such as Tony Blair and Gerhard Schröder. In other words, support for European integration is vital to the party's self-image and ties in with its broader ideological objectives, as well as providing an opportunity for it to contrast itself favourably with the (allegedly) nationalist and inward-looking Polish right. Secondly, the SLD-led government now has a huge political stake in the outcome of the accession process and will work vigorously to ensure that it is a success and that Poles vote 'Yes' in the forthcoming referendum on accession.

### *Civic Platform (PO)*

The PO was formed in January 2001 by the so-called 'three tenors'. Maciej Plazynski and Donald Tusk, leading members respectively of AWS and the UW, defected together with their supporters to join former Foreign and Finance Minister Andrzej Olechowski in building on his relative success as an independent candidate in the October 2000 presidential election, where he secured second place and 17 per cent of the

vote. Formed as a liberal-conservative grouping, the PO enjoyed initial levels of support between 15 and 20 per cent in the opinion polls. However, it then lost momentum somewhat and, although it emerged as the second largest grouping in the new parliament, it did so with only 12.68 per cent of the vote and 65 seats. The PO attempted to give itself a harder and more populist political edge by taking up issues such as advocating low taxes and directly elected local mayors, and tackling political corruption. However, the PO has inherited both the UW's liberal electorate and its place in the 'centre' of political spectrum, which it had originally hoped that it could transcend.

Along with the SLD, the PO is the most pro-EU parliamentary grouping and, concentrated as it is on younger, urban and better-off voters, has easily the most pro-EU supporters. However, the PO barely mentioned the European issue in its election campaign and has found it rather difficult to adjust to a position of being a pro-EU opposition party. For example, it strongly criticized the government's new negotiating strategy but more for the way that it was announced (with certain key concessions being unveiled in Brussels rather than in Poland) and for the fact that it had made these concessions to the Commission without any promise of reciprocity on other issues. Indeed, leaving itself open to criticism that it was simply allowing the Eurosceptics to dictate the terms of the Polish Euro-debate, the PO has found it difficult to carve out a distinctive position for itself on this issue and has not given it a very high profile.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, whatever reservations the PO has regarding the SLD-PSL government's negotiating strategy or tactics, it will certainly favour a 'Yes' vote in the referendum.

### *Self-Defence (Samoobrona)*

Self-Defence is both a political party and a farmers' union that was formed in 1992 to campaign against debt foreclosures, led by the radical populist Andrzej Lepper. Lepper campaigned unsuccessfully for parliament and the presidency throughout the 1990s, then returned to high-profile public life at the beginning of 1999 when he led a series of farmers' road blockades that played a critical role in knocking the Buzek government off-balance, a blow from which it never really recovered. It was only really in the last couple of weeks of the 2001 election campaign that Self-Defence began to register high levels of support in the opinion polls. Nevertheless, it gained support very quickly to finish in third place, winning 10.2 per cent of the vote and 53 seats. Since the election the party has largely held on to (and possibly even increased) its share of support in opinion polls despite the highly controversial rhetoric employed by its leader.

Self-Defence is widely perceived to be a strongly Eurosceptic party. Indeed, in its election programme it

accused the EU in particular and the West in general of exploiting Poland and called for the building of closer ties with the country's Eastern neighbours. In another policy statement, the party made its support for EU membership conditional upon Poland being allowed to maintain unlimited subsidies and production limits for agriculture, coal and iron and steel, which would in effect have constituted an exemption from the provisions of the Single Market. Since the election, Self-Defence has bitterly attacked the SLD-PSL government for its more flexible approach to the sale of Polish land to foreigners. However, the party has also sent rather mixed signals on the European issue, and during the July 2002 parliamentary debate on the Convention on the Future of Europe the Self-Defence spokesman spoke in quite warm terms about the process of European integration. Indeed, Self-Defence's opposition to (or support for) the EU appears to be couched in completely instrumental terms and the party does not seem to take any principled position on the European integration process as such. Although Self-Defence is likely to oppose EU membership in the forthcoming referendum, it is likely do so on the populist ground that the 'deal' being offered to Poland is unsatisfactory, rather than because of principled opposition.

#### *Law and Justice (PiS)*

PiS was formed in April 2001 by the right-wing post-Solidarity politician Jaroslaw Kaczynski. It was to form the basis of a 'renewed right' by capitalizing on the popularity of Kaczynski's brother, Lech, who, although not himself a member of any AWS-affiliated party or grouping, served as Justice Minister in the AWS minority government from June 2000 to August 2001. Lech Kaczynski was incredibly popular owing to his tough anti-crime and anti-corruption rhetoric (his actual record on these issues is subject to much greater controversy). PiS fought the election in coalition with the Polish Alliance (PP). This party was also formed in April 2001, by a group of defectors from the ZChN and the Conservative People's Party, another AWS-affiliated grouping, and the two parties formally merged at the start of 2002. Although it did not quite live up to its supporters' high expectations, PiS performed creditably in the 2001 election, picking up many disillusioned AWS voters to finish fourth with 9.5 per cent of the vote and 44 seats.

PiS policy on European issues is rather ambiguous and not yet fully developed. The official party position is supportive of Polish EU membership as the only realistic foreign policy alternative for Poland. However, during the election campaign, PiS opposed acceleration of the accession negotiations if it would lead to a 'second-class membership' package. Moreover, PiS faces

the same dilemma as the PO on the European issue – being broadly supportive of EU membership but in opposition to an SLD government that has made accession one of its flagship policies. The dilemma is even more acute in the case of PiS, given that it contains a sizeable Eurosceptic faction comprising some ex-ZChN members who, if not actual opponents of EU membership, were among the party's most vocal critics of the EU. Since the election, PiS has largely confined its statements to criticizing the government's negotiating strategy, opposing the Commission's agriculture proposals and promoting a parliamentary resolution opposing EU interference on moral-cultural issues such as abortion (on which it has no competencies and no plans to develop them either). In fact, PiS voters are marginally more pro-EU than the average Polish citizen and the party still remains very likely to support EU membership in the referendum.

#### *Polish Peasant Party (PSL)*

The PSL was formed in May 1990 as the direct organizational successor to the communist satellite party, the United Peasant Party (ZSL), although it has attempted to locate itself within the (anti-communist) traditions of the earlier Polish agrarian movement that dates back to the nineteenth century. As noted above, the PSL was the SLD's coalition partner from 1993 to 1997. Its leader Pawlak served as prime minister from October 1993 to February 1995 (having earlier served briefly served as caretaker premier in June 1992), and during this time Poland submitted its application for EU membership. However, at the 1997 election the party's share of the vote was halved and seat share slashed. Nevertheless, although it did not perform as well as it had hoped in 2001, the party increased its share of the vote slightly, winning 8.98 per cent of the vote and 42 seats, thus returning to office as the SLD's junior coalition partner.

The PSL has often been portrayed as a Eurosceptic party because its spokesmen have frequently referred to the EU in rather negative terms. During the 2001 election campaign, for example, the party adopted what it termed a 'Euro-realist' position, arguing that Poland had to be tough in defending its interests or it would be exploited by a 'rich man's club'. However, the party said very little about the actual principle of European political and economic integration or how it saw the European project developing in the future. Like most other parties it viewed the accession process purely through the prism of domestic politics and the 'deal' that Poland would secure in the accession negotiations.

Owing to this critical approach to the EU, it was widely assumed, as noted above, that the return of the PSL to government would make it considerably more



difficult for the SLD to make concessions to speed up the accession negotiations. The party did acquiesce in the softening of the government's negotiating stance on the sale of Polish land to foreigners. However, it did so extremely grudgingly and only on the basis of guarantees from its leader, Agriculture Minister Kalinowski, that it would be able to protect Polish ownership of land as a result of his proposed 'land turnover' law. Moreover, the party reacted in an extremely hostile way to the Commission's proposals on agricultural subsidies; Kalinowski threatened to continue placing tariffs on agricultural products from EU countries after accession if Polish farmers were not treated on equal terms with those in member states. While it still remains unlikely that the party will oppose EU membership in an accession referendum, it will also be extremely difficult for it to accept the Commission's current proposals on agriculture as they affect the direct interest of the party's core electoral constituency. Moreover, the PSL is increasingly vulnerable electorally: since the emergence of Self-Defence it faces its first direct, rural-based competitor for the agrarian vote since it saw off the post-Solidarity peasant groupings in the early 1990s. If there is no improvement in the Commission's position, this will place the PSL in an extremely difficult dilemma and its response to it will be hard to predict.

### *The League of Polish Families (LPR)*

Apart from Self-Defence, the other major surprise of the 2001 election was the sudden emergence and election to parliament of the LPR with 7.87 per cent of the vote and 38 seats. The LPR was formed as a coalition of small right-wing parties and groupings in the middle of 2001. However, the real power behind the LPR was the fundamentalist Catholic radio station, Radio Maryja, which has four million listeners, forming the hard-core 'religious right' electorate in Poland. Under its charismatic and strongly anti-EU director, Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, Radio Maryja has been able to mobilize these voters, who account for about 5 to 10 per cent of the total. Father Rydzyk helped AWS to secure victory over the SLD in 1997, but in 2001 he switched his support to the LPR, thereby helping the hard-right grouping to achieve parliamentary representation.

The LPR is a disparate and unstable coalition comprising several parties and personalities vying for leadership of the grouping. However, following the defection of Jan Olszewski's Movement for Poland's Reconstruction (ROP) immediately after the election, the grouping is united on its outright opposition to Polish EU membership. Unlike Self-Defence, LPR's anti-EU stance is based not simply on instrumental economic populism (although there are undoubtedly

elements of this in its rhetoric on European issues) but on a more fundamental, principled objection to European integration as a threat to Poland's continued sovereign statehood. Although the LPR's capacity to mobilize opposition to the EU on this basis is limited, as noted above, its presence in parliament has led to an important shift in the terms of the debate about European integration. Indeed, the LPR has been extremely effective in using its new parliamentary platform to convey its Eurosceptic message; it has put the pro-EU opposition parties in an awkward position through, for example, its attempt to sponsor a referendum specifically on the issue of the sale of Polish land to foreigners. Indeed, one LPR leader, Roman Giertych, has emerged as a presentable and articulate spokesman for the Eurosceptic cause, providing a figurehead that it had previously lacked.

---

### **Public opinion and prospects for the referendum on EU membership**

---

Polish support for EU membership fell from nearly 80 per cent in 1994 when the membership application was submitted (one of the highest levels of support among the candidate states) to between 55 and 60 per cent in the middle of 1999. Over the same period, the number of opponents of EU membership increased from a negligible 5 per cent to a more substantial 20–25 per cent bloc of the population (the number of 'don't knows' has remained steady at 15–20 per cent). There were a number of reasons for this steady decline in support for EU membership:

1. Given the existence of an overwhelming pro-EU consensus among political elites, Polish opponents of EU membership may previously have been reluctant to identify themselves and earlier polling data may have artificially overstated the true levels of public support.
2. Since there was also very little serious debate about the potential costs and benefits of EU accession, the previous very high levels of support may not have represented conscious and considered positions.
3. In the light of the difficult issues that needed to be tackled, the accession negotiations themselves inevitably focused to a large extent on the concessions that had to be made by the Polish side. This, in turn, raised the profile of the European issue in Polish politics in a very negative way: Brussels was increasingly seen as a focus for conflict and hostility. In this sense, the more recent polling data were arguably simply more accurate reflections of the true levels of support for Polish EU membership and therefore represented a kind of 'reality check'.

4. Perhaps most significantly, the period since the beginning of the accession negotiations has seen a striking politicization of the debate on Polish EU membership. As noted above, this was not so much about whether or not the country should join *per se* but about the terms on which it should join and the kind of EU it wanted to join. Nevertheless, the overall effect of this kind of 'Euro-realist' rhetoric was to create the impression that Poland was negotiating with an enemy and that EU membership was a regrettable necessity rather than something to be sought positively.

With some minor fluctuations, the levels of support for Polish EU membership have stabilized at the above levels since 1999, and it remains extremely likely that Poles will vote 'Yes' in the accession referendum scheduled for spring 2003. Several factors contribute to this:

1. There is evidence that, at root, the Polish public has a fairly realistic attitude towards the costs and benefits of EU accession.

2. Polling evidence suggests that supporters of Polish membership are more likely to turn out to vote than are opponents.

3. The fact that the influential Catholic Church hierarchy has become increasingly vocal in its support for EU membership – on his most recent visit to Poland in August 2002, for example, the Pope reiterated his support for Polish EU membership – has helped to counter the influence of Radio Maryja on the Catholic rank-and-file, and will continue to do so.

4. Perhaps most significantly, even if most Poles are not particularly enthusiastic about EU membership, the pro-EU camp's strongest card remains the Eurosceptics' lack of a credible or attractive alternative foreign policy.

5. Finally, the fact that there has been a lively public debate on Polish EU membership, including the voicing of openly Eurosceptic views and concomitant hardening of public attitudes, means that polling data provide a reasonably solid and accurate representation of the true state of Polish public opinion, more so than in other candidate countries that have lacked such a debate.

Two factors that could potentially cause problems for the pro-EU camp remain. First, the EU accession referendum could become a surrogate for the expression of discontent on other issues. For example, if it were transformed into a more general plebiscite

on the socio-economic transition as a whole a broader range of people could be drawn into the 'No' camp (currently most 'transition losers' still support EU membership, albeit in smaller proportions than 'transition winners'). Similarly, given that premier Leszek Miller has declared that the (increasingly unpopular) SLD government would resign if it lost the accession vote, there is a danger that Poles could use the referendum as an opportunity to cast a vote of no confidence in the government. Secondly, the referendum could fail to obtain the 50 per cent turnout required by the Polish Constitution for it to be valid. Three out of the last four Polish parliamentary elections have, in fact, failed to achieve this threshold. However, there are currently discussions about introducing legislation to allow parliament to approve an accession treaty that has obtained a majority in a referendum even if turnout falls below the 50 per cent required, and President Kwasniewski is likely to sponsor a bill to facilitate this.

---

## Conclusion

---

In spite of periods of political turbulence, an unstable and unbalanced party system, and negative public reactions to the social costs of economic reform and the recent downturn, Poland continues to make good progress towards developing as a consolidated capitalist liberal democracy. Alongside the domestic political and economic transformation, membership of Western international organizations remains the key priority for Polish foreign policy, with EU membership currently the main overarching objective. Despite the problems associated with being the largest of the candidate states, coupled with some more avoidable difficulties, the accession negotiations have made good progress and gained valuable momentum when the new SLD-led government adopted a more flexible negotiating strategy. Although some very controversial issues on finance, regional aid, agriculture and competition policy remain to be resolved while others such as the sale of land to foreigners remain dormant and could re-emerge as issues in the future, Poland remains on track to complete the negotiations by the end of 2002.

Some commentators saw the 2001 parliamentary election as representing a Eurosceptic backlash. Certainly, a much larger bloc of Eurosceptics were elected to the Polish parliament, including parties such as the LPR that were openly hostile to the European integration process *per se*. These groupings have shifted the balance within the parliament and placed broadly pro-EU opposition parties such as the PO and PiS in an awkward position. The fact that the SLD fell short of obtaining a parliamentary majority and had to

form a coalition with the agrarian PSL has also made it more difficult for the new government to agree concessions, particularly because the PSL faces the emergence of a serious agrarian rival in the form of the radical populist Self-Defence. However, parliament remains overwhelmingly pro-EU; the two largest groupings are the most enthusiastic and the emergence of a Eurosceptic bloc has not prevented the new government from pushing forward the accession negotiations. Although there was a sharp decline in support for EU membership at the end of the 1990s, support has stabilized at a high level and Poles are

likely to vote 'Yes' in the accession referendum scheduled for spring 2003.

What is more difficult to predict is what kind of EU member Poland will be, since most of the Euro-debate to date has (perhaps inevitably) tended to focus on the detail of the accession negotiations rather than the future trajectory of the European political and economic integration project. Democratic unanimity over EU accession may not extend to implementation of the *acquis*, if CSSD electoral support is badly undercut by the short- to medium-term socio-economic impacts of accession.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> From June 2000 when the UW left the government it functioned as a minority AWS administration.
- <sup>2</sup> Previously it had been fragmented between the Foreign Ministry, in which the Committee for European Integration was located, and the Prime Minister's Chancellery out of which the Chief Negotiator worked.
- <sup>3</sup> In contrast to, say, the lengthy policy statements issued by the Czech Civic Democratic Party.
- <sup>4</sup> Indeed, with one or two notable exceptions, it has generally emerged as a rather weak parliamentary opposition.

*Aleks Szczerbiak is a Lecturer in Contemporary European Studies at the Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex.*

*This paper forms part of the European Enlargement project jointly undertaken by RIIA and Lovells.*

**The European Programme** serves as a forum for research and debate on questions of politics, economics and security in Europe. Covering EU and non-EU countries alike, the Programme seeks to stimulate informed discussion and to brief politicians, officials, business, journalists and the wider public. It undertakes a broad range of research activities and also convenes seminars and workshops on a variety of European issues.

The Royal Institute of International Affairs is an independent body which promotes the rigorous study of international questions and does not express opinions of its own. The opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author.

© Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2002. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any other means without the prior permission of the copyright holder.



