



The Evolution of Poland's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans

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Abstract

The main aim of this article is to outline the evolution of Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkan region from 1989 to modern times. Poland's foreign policy towards that region can be divided into several stages, the first being the period between the collapse of the Eastern Bloc and Poland's full accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e., 1989-2004. The second stage is the 2004-2010 period when Poland implemented its Balkan policy that was underpinned by the European Union's approach, and practically co-participated in the European Union's policy towards the Balkan states. The third stage's commencement was marked by Poland's preparations for the EU Council Presidency in 2011, and its obligation to coordinate the EU's Balkan policy as well. This stage is characterised by Poland's greater involvement in creating policy towards the Balkans, as evidenced by the organisation of a summit called the Berlin Process in Poznań in 2019, which was the initiative of a group of EU Member States involved in developing cooperation with the Western Balkan states. In modern times, however, Poland's policy in the Balkans remains limited while it should be far more vigorous due to the concerns related to Russia's influence and expansion in that region.

Keywords

Poland, Foreign Policy, the Balkans

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To cite this article: Adamczyk, A. (2022). The Evolution of Poland's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans. *SİYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences*, 31(Suppl. 1), S147–S164. <http://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2022.31.944123>



Introduction

The main aim of this article is to outline the evolution of Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkan region from 1989 to modern times. In order to achieve the said aim, one should apply a chronological and problematic method that will allow for a proper analysis of Poland's activity in the Balkan region resulting from the emergence of various determinants affecting the decisions of Polish diplomacy.

The first being the period between the demise of the Eastern Bloc and Poland's full accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e., 1989-2004. The second stage is the 2004-2010 period when Poland implemented its Balkan policy that was underpinned by the European Union's stance, and basically co-participated in the European Union's policy towards the Balkan states. The third stage's commencement was marked by Poland's preparations for the EU Council Presidency in 2011, and its obligation to coordinate the EU's Balkan policy as well. This stage is characterised by Poland's greater involvement in creating policy towards the Balkans, as evidenced by the organisation of a summit called the Berlin Process in Poznań in 2019, which was the initiative of a group of EU Member States involved in developing cooperation with the Western Balkan states. In modern times, however, Poland's policy in the Balkans remains limited while it should be far more vigorous due to the concerns related to Russia's influence and expansion in that region.

While analysing Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkans, it should be emphasised that it is two dimensional. The first dimension constitutes bilateral relations which are rather limited and somewhat modest for such a sizeable country from Central Europe. The second dimension encompasses multilateral relations arising from Poland's membership in various organisations actively operating in the region, i.e., the European Union, NATO, OSCE, or the United Nations. Particularly noteworthy is Poland's membership in the European Union and international structures functioning within the EU, i.e. the Visegrad Group, and the Berlin Process thanks to which Poland is present in the Balkans.

While discussing the evolution of Poland's policy towards the Balkan states, it should also be specified which countries are covered by this policy, i.e., which states are considered to be Balkan states. By the end of the 1980s, the Balkan states encompassed Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania. Due to its membership in the European Communities, Greece was not defined as a Balkan state but was defined as a southern European state. Turkey was also not treated as a Balkan state. The breakup of Yugoslavia transformed the political map of the region and new countries such as: Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia¹, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia (originally Macedonia)², and Kosovo emerged (Olszewski, 2010A; Wojnicki, 2003; Karadzoski & Adamczyk, 2015 ; Adamczyk & Karadzoski, 2019). At the same time, some of the countries described as Balkan states tried not only to discard this term but also ceased

1 In 1991, following the declaration of independence by Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FR Yugoslavia) which comprised the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Montenegro remained. In 2003, FR Yugoslavia was transformed into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, and in 2006, as a result of Montenegro's secession, two separate states emerged: Serbia and Montenegro.

2 In 2019 the Macedonian Parliament changed the state's name from the Republic of Macedonia to the Republic of North Macedonia. The decision was a result of an agreement signed by the governments in Skopje and Athens putting an end to a years-long dispute over the name of the Macedonian state.

being identified with that unstable and conflict-ridden region. Slovenia immediately “cut itself off” politically from the Balkans (Olszewski, 2010 A), and the accession process of Bulgaria, Romania (2007), and Croatia (2013) to the European Union occasioned that these countries also ceased to be referred to as Balkan states. Poland's relations with these countries are implemented within the framework of the European Union. Currently, the policy towards the Balkans means shaping relations with the group of countries defined by the European Union as the Western Balkans, including Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Albania (Babić, 2014).

Shaping Poland's Relations with the Balkan States between 1989 - 2004

At the beginning, it should be emphasised that the Balkans did not play a leading role in shaping Poland's foreign policy at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. This was due to the fact that the government in Warsaw focused its attention on the state's security in the neighbouring international area, i.e., across the eastern and western borders following the demise of the Eastern bloc (Bieleń, 2011). On the one hand, the changes referred to the process of German reunification and the emergence of a strong neighbour in the West. Across the eastern border, however, the geopolitical situation transformed dramatically since the Soviet Union collapsed and new states, new neighbours of uncertain subjectivity, durability and future emerged. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc, which also meant the destruction of the Warsaw Pact, positioned Poland in a specific vacuum of security and uncertainty with regards mainly to the situation in the East. It does not come as a surprise that the priorities in Poland's foreign policy in the early 1990s were to strengthen relations with the democratic countries of the West and their organisational structures as well as to establish and stabilise contact with its immediate neighbours (Orzelska, 2011). These, then, were the objectives that Poland focused its efforts and energy on in the new geopolitical situation. At that time, Poland was a weak country; it participated in no system guaranteeing security and was also indebted and far from having any ambition to prioritise relations with the Balkan states.

The foregoing does not necessarily mean that Poland marginalised and did not care about maintaining and building bilateral relations with countries from that region with which Poland was mainly connected through ties arising from the cooperation within the Socialist Bloc. It has to be noted, however, that even the socialist states in the Balkans have never been a monolith. This applies to Albania pursuing a policy of isolation or non-involvement of Yugoslavia, which affected the diverse intensity in the bilateral relations of the Polish People's Republic (Czekalski, Hauziński, & Leśny, 2009; Habowski 2016). The government in Warsaw had already established good relations with Bulgaria and Romania, which translated into the signing of agreements on friendly relations and cooperation with the governments from Sofia and Bucharest in 1993 (Pacula, 2015; Koseski, 2019; Czernicka, 2019). Common ground for cooperation between Poland and both countries were concerns regarding instability in the East, support for building Ukraine's statehood and pursuit to participate in Euro-Atlantic structures, i.e. NATO and the EU, in order to obtain the much-needed security guarantees (Kotulewicz-Wisińska, 2018). Both Romania and Bulgaria were extremely interested in conflict de-escalation in the crumbling Yugoslavia, hence, Poland, by signing agreements with both countries,

also expressed profound concerns about the situation in the Balkans (Czernicka 2019). The main outcome, however, of these agreements was economic exchange and mutual support on the road to NATO and the EU. Poland's involvement in Yugoslav problems, nevertheless, remained limited to declarations and simply awaiting Western countries' decisions. In the early 1990s, Poland also strengthened its relations with Albania, which was manifested in the signing by both governments of an array of technical and economic agreements regulating outstanding issues in bilateral relations regarding *inter alia* transportation, tourism, and agriculture (Albania). However, it should be underlined that political relations were very limited, and stemmed from the unstable situation in Albania³ (Balcer, 2008).

Poland's policy towards the disintegration processes in Yugoslavia requires particular attention. The government in Warsaw observed Yugoslavia's process of disintegration through the prism of the uncertain situation across its eastern border. They feared the so-called domino effect, i.e., that the Balkan events would affect the uncontrolled collapse of the Soviet Union, which in 1991, like Yugoslavia, was a crumbling, nationally and religiously diverse state. Hence, Poland's policy was very conservative and expectant. It was emphasised that solving Yugoslav problems should not jeopardise international security, thus, Polish diplomacy closely monitored the declarations of Western European states and of the United States, but was afraid to undertake any actions itself. Since the White House announced that the Balkan issues should be resolved by European countries, Warsaw focused its attention on the diplomatic signs from the European Communities. As A. Orzelska emphasises, Poland, rather like the EC, initially made an appeal for the preservation of the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and refrained from recognising the independence proclaimed by Slovenia and Croatia (Orzelska, 2011). The said stance entailed expectations that preserving Yugoslavia's unity would prevent armed conflict and repercussions for European security. However, when it turned out that the determined societies of Croatia and Slovenia could not have been stopped from executing the principle of self-determination, and the government in Belgrade was trying to maintain the country's unity by using the Serbian army, the European Community members announced in December 1991 their willingness to recognise Croatia and Slovenia. Poland was also expecting potential after-effects of the Yugoslav disintegration process on the situation across its eastern border. When, on 8th December 1991, the Belavezha Accords were signed, which dissolved the USSR in a controlled manner and established the Commonwealth of Independent States, the reassured government in Warsaw followed the decisions of the EC Member States and on 21st January 1992 recognised the sovereignty of Croatia and Slovenia (Orzelska, 2011).

Such coordination, or rather subordination of Poland's policy towards the Balkans to the Western European states' position stemmed from a number of grounds. Firstly, Poland itself had not developed any coherent policy towards the Balkans following the eradication of the Eastern Bloc. The rapid breakup of Yugoslavia took all European countries by surprise and therefore the government in Warsaw decided that it was better to base its decisions in a situation of uncertainty on the European mainstream, i.e., the

3 Albania has been struggling with corruption problems, organised crime, trafficking, and a weak political class.

EC. What is more, Poland clearly declared its aspirations to join the European Union and NATO, which was associated with the willingness, or even the need, to demonstrate its support for and solidarity with the decisions made by members of those structures. After all, EU and NATO membership was subject to the acclamation of the existing members, hence Poland's diplomacy had to be very careful and conscious in order to avoid possible confrontation with any of its members. It comes as no surprise then that when the EC and the US recognised Bosnia and Herzegovina on 7th April 1992, Poland followed suit just two days later. The same applied to Macedonia, whose recognition process was prolonged due to the dispute with Greece over the state's name (Stawowy-Kawka, 2000, Olszewski, 2010B). Poland recognised the said country on 28th December 1993 under its technical name established at the UN forum: the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia - (FYROM). This took place just a few days after the majority of the European Union states took a similar decision.

Although Poland did not establish its own foreign policy towards the Balkans, the willingness to join the North Atlantic Treaty and the European Union forced the country to undertake international activity which made its presence visible in this region. The said visibility was manifested mainly through the participation of Polish contingents and representatives in various missions and actions carried out by those international organisations in the Balkans. However, in order to reaffirm its credibility and responsibility for the international order and the preservation of peace and security, Poland also strived to participate in United Nations and CSCE/OSCE missions. Such activity was to strengthen its position and prospects for membership in Euro-Atlantic structures. Polish soldiers participated *inter alia* in the very difficult and dangerous United Nations Protection Force mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where between 1992-1995 they operated to resolve the conflict between the Serbs and Croats. After the Dayton Agreement was signed in 1995 on Bosnia and Herzegovina's future, Poles continued their mission in the Implementation Forces as part of NATO operations, and subsequently in the Stabilization Forces, which were to ensure the implementation of peace provisions and stabilise the situation of the young state (Smolarek, 2016). It should be emphasised that during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Polish diplomacy's stance was in line with general appeals for the preservation of peace, along with the condemnation of genocide and violation of human rights. However, Warsaw itself did not come up with any initiatives and made its position dependent on the decisions of the EU and NATO.

Poland was somewhat more active in the conflict between the Kosovars and the government in Belgrade at the turn of 1998/1999. Poland, determined to join NATO and the EU, took advantage of every possible situation to emphasise its readiness for accession and, at the same time, its value as an ally. Poland's presidency in the CSCE/OSCE in 1998, which enabled the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs B. Geremek to demonstrate his diplomatic skills in resolving conflict, also served that objective. At the same time, an agreement in Belgrade was signed in 1998 on the establishment of the Kosovo Verification Mission, which was to monitor the situation in the rebellious region and lead to closer cooperation between the OSCE and NATO (Orzelska, 2011). Undoubtedly, Minister B. Geremek's activity contributed to the strengthening of Poland's position in its endeavours to join NATO.

The escalation of the conflict in Kosovo at the beginning of 1999 contributed to a greater involvement of NATO members, in particular the USA, in its resolution. Washington, which in the early 1990s handed over the initiative to pacify the situation in the Balkans to the European Union Member States, this time took over as the international leader in stabilising the situation in Kosovo. As a result, there was a NATO airborne intervention in Serbia which forced military operations in the rebellious region to cease. At that time Poland showed no originality or independence in implementing its own foreign policy. It simply followed the US's lead and unquestionably supported the NATO military intervention in Serbia. In the absence of the UN Security Council's approval (Zięba, 2013), the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs justified its support for the intervention by the necessity to resolve the humanitarian crisis, defend human rights and put an end to ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. The real determinant of the Polish position was to demonstrate credibility, predictability, and loyalty as an ally to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization members, in particular the USA (Zajac, 2015). The culmination of Poland's accession endeavours to NATO on 12th March 1999 coincided with the commencement of air strikes on Serbia as part of NATO's Operation Allied Force which began 12 days later. Poland did not take part in the NATO military action due to the lack of technical compatibility but joined the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission, the aim of which was to restore normality in the region and guarantee security to its inhabitants. Polish soldiers also participated in the NATO-led Albania Force (AFOR) operation, as part of which they provided humanitarian aid to Kosovar refugees in Albania (Arnold, 2019).

NATO membership as well as the support for the intervention in Kosovo affected the perception of Poland by the Balkan states. This was particularly visible in relations with Serbia and Croatia. Without doubt, relations with Belgrade cooled but, on the other hand, relations with Zagreb intensified (Habowski, 2016). Croatia, which had had poor post-war relations with Serbia, undeniably recognised the Polish government as its political ally (Podgórska, 2013). It should be emphasised, however, that Poland's relations with Belgrade were historically decent and the negative narrative towards Serbia was created due to the Polish government's determination to establish the image of an unwavering, steadfast ally in the eyes of NATO Member States. The policy towards Serbia stemmed from the fact that our interests were subordinated to the greater goal of Polish diplomacy (Habowski, 2016). In official declarations, however, the Polish government tried to avoid criticising Serbia in favour of articulating the need to maintain European security and protect human rights.

At the same time, Poland was perceived as a successful country undergoing political transformation which then became a NATO member and entered into negotiations with the European Union. Our accession experience became extremely valuable for Croatia and other Balkan states seeking to obtain a security guarantee by joining NATO. The aforementioned applied to Bulgaria and Romania, which perceived Poland as a proponent of their Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The government in Warsaw, however, hoped that assisting these countries and sharing Poland's experiences with them could result in future coalitions that would support the fundamental goals of Polish foreign policy, mainly related to weakening Russia's influence in Eastern Europe. Poland strengthened its contacts with those countries by sharing knowledge on political transformation, economic reforms

and negotiations for NATO accession (Koseski, 2019). Poland's activity and support for Romania and Bulgaria contributed to a positive outcome of their endeavours to join NATO. In March 2004, NATO was joined by another group of allies thus extending the Treaty's security zone by new states in Eastern Europe⁴ and, at the same time, the first Balkan states, which were formerly part of the Warsaw Pact. Taking into account Poland's foreign policy objectives, such decision was certainly in line with Polish diplomacy's path since NATO incorporated a group of countries that particularly feared the restoration of Russian influence in Europe and, at the same time, were interested in integration with the European Union.

The break-up of Yugoslavia and its aftermath continued to affect the situation in the region. The crisis in Kosovo, which at that time bordered with the Republic of Macedonia, contributed to the outbreak of riots by the Albanian population against the government in Skopje in 2001, and NATO and the European Union were once again involved in resolving the conflict. Poland, as was the case with the NATO accession process, also decided to take the loyalty test and undertook a more proactive role in proving that it could be a reliable and trustworthy partner under the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy. The aim of such actions was undoubtedly to strengthen our European Union accession endeavours. An expression of such an approach was Poland's participation in the EU military mission (CONCORDIA) in FYROM in order to stabilise the situation between the Albanian community and the Macedonian government, as well as to strengthen its structures. Once the project was completed in 2003, the EU initiated a new operation, this time a police one (PROXIMA), in which Poland was also engaged (Smolarek, 2016; Szpala, 2008; Podgórzńska, 2015).

Years of endeavours to meet the membership criteria as well as Poland's involvement in the EU's international activities, including in the Balkans, resulted in Poland's accession to the European Union in May 2004. Becoming a NATO and European Union member was the culmination of the most crucial goals in foreign policy that Polish governments pursued following 1989. Poland joined a group of countries under the most effective security umbrella, guaranteeing stable economic development and the improvement of citizens' life quality. It was a paramount goal that completely superseded other directions of Polish politics. There is no surprise that the Balkans constituted no priority for Poland at that time. Since all our endeavours were focused on internal transformation as well as fulfilling the criteria for the transatlantic structures' membership, Poland, being politically and economically weak, was unable to pursue a creative, offensive policy in a region that was not its direct neighbour. It does not, however, mean that it was not an important region for Poland's security. Successive governments, nevertheless, assumed that in the absence of the ability to independently influence the situation in the Balkans, it was better to emulate the positions of the stronger countries, NATO and EU members, since it would give us the opportunity to create a positive image in the eyes of our future allies in those organisations. Such stance, undoubtedly, can be assessed as dependent and servile, but on the other hand it was a pragmatic and effective policy since it was eventually successful for Poland.

4 Along with Bulgaria and Romania, countries like Slovenia, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia acceded to NATO.

NATO and the EU memberships played a dual role in Polish politics. Firstly, Poland, which had no independent, specific, clearly-defined, long-term nor initiatory policy towards the Balkans, followed the decisions of the most important states in those organisations, i.e., the USA in NATO, and Germany, the UK, and France in the EU. On the other hand, for the Balkan states, Poland's presence in the Euro-Atlantic structures meant that it was a successful country with extensive experience in political and economic transformation, and which could be perceived as a specific role model. Poland is a country that has been able to ensure its international security and the welfare of its inhabitants.

Polish Policy towards the Balkans between 2004-2010

Poland's security and stable-development guarantees that followed its membership in Euro-Atlantic structures put an end to a certain era in its foreign policy and opened up new opportunities and, above all, offered the chance to redefine the goals of Polish diplomacy. Changes in a bilateral dimension as well as in the participation in the European Union's policy towards third countries were expected. Up to that point, Poland had no real abilities to influence the decisions of the EU diplomacy, but only to participate in activities and operations adopted by other Member States. Following the accession, new opportunities emerged in which Poland could co-create and even initiate directions for the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Poland was obviously a fledgling member and it was difficult for such "nouveau riche" to be included in the EU mainstream, i.e., alongside Germany, France, or the UK. But Poland was also the largest out of the newly acceded EU states with leadership ambitions among Central and Eastern European countries. Consolidating security guarantees remained a strategic goal for Poland, and as a NATO and EU member it became their frontier country, for which the situation across its eastern border constituted the greatest problem and challenge. Therefore, Poland consistently sought to weaken Russia's influence in Eastern Europe and to strengthen the ties of its neighbours, i.e., Ukraine and Belarus, with the European Union. Consequently, Poland's energy and efforts at the EU forum focused on establishing a coalition that would ensure the use of "soft power" to incorporate the former Soviet republics into the European Union's sphere of influence (Barburska, 2018; Barburska & Milczarek, 2014). Warsaw was obviously also interested in the situation in the Balkans since the consolidation of European security depended in particular on the stabilisation of the embroiled and disunited societies of that region (Żornaczuk, 2010; Tereszkievicz, 2013). It was also in Poland's interest to weaken Russia's influence on the Balkan peninsula. Poland, however, was aware of its limited capabilities and decided to focus its attention on the eastern dimension of the EU's policy, thus, leaving the Balkan course to the EU members more interested in that region (Domagała, 2014). The foregoing was tantamount to staying on course with the existing policy towards the Balkans, but Poland's role grew from a "pre-EU subcontractor" to a "limited, passive contractor/co-creator" of this policy. Poland's position was mainly to support the EU enlargement process in the Balkans since it meant weakening Russia's position in Europe by curbing its influence. Poland, therefore, supported the accession efforts of Bulgaria and Romania, which joined the European Union in 2007 (Koseski, 2019). Two years later Poland signed a declaration on strategic partnership with Romania on security, energy, climate, agriculture, and transport cooperation (Kotulewicz-Wisińska, 2018). The admission of these two countries to the

EU strengthened the coalition that was being built by Poland, and which focused on the eastern dimension of the EU. Both countries declared their support for the Polish-Swedish initiative to create the EU Eastern Partnership in 2009. It was obvious, however, that the said countries expected Poland's involvement in the further enlargement of the EU and NATO by the Balkan states, which for them was a priority. The government in Warsaw unquestionably supported the EU enlargement policy since they were aware of the fact that membership perspective was the most effective motivator to implement reforms in the neighbouring countries. Poland's support for EU enlargement by other Balkan states was in line with its interests of EU enlargement by Eastern Partnership states (Żornaczuk, 2019). Poland's engagement in the Balkans was also somewhat "coerced" by its participation in the Visegrad Group - V4 (Żornaczuk, 2012). Since Poland tried to use that forum to pursue its own interests in the EU, it also had to remain open to the demands of the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary, and it was the government in Budapest that was particularly interested in stabilising the situation in the Balkans. Hungary bordered directly with that troubled region, in particular the Republic of Serbia, which played an infamous role in the process of the break-up of Yugoslavia. Poland had to demonstrate solidarity with Hungarian interests in the Balkans if it wanted Hungary to be reciprocal in the implementation of the Eastern Partnership. Since its presidency of the V4 in 2005, Budapest had consistently made the policy towards the Balkans a priority of the Visegrad Group (Griessler, 2018).

All members of the Visegrad Group participated at the same time in the informal Group of Friends of EU Enlargement (the Tallinn Group), which intensified its endeavours for the accession of new members from Eastern Europe and the Balkans⁵. The Balkan states were promised membership but without any specific dates during the EU summit in Thessaloniki in 2003, i.e., one year before Poland joined the EU. The Warsaw government's activity became part of the so-called the Thessaloniki Agenda, which encouraged Balkan countries to meet membership criteria by implementing the relevant reforms. Pursuant to the Agenda, the EU signed bilateral Stabilization and Association Agreements with interested countries, which required political, economic, and social transformation (Marcinkowska, 2015). In return it offered financial assistance as well as trade facilitation in accessing the EU market. It was the EU's unswerving policy of drawing the Balkan states into its sphere of influence as well as the membership perspective that was the most effective instrument of influence. Poland strongly supported the signing of the said agreements with Croatia in 2005, Albania in 2006, Montenegro in 2007, and Serbia as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2008. Poland also supported granting FYROM EU candidate status in 2005 (Łakota-Micker, 2016; Olszewski, 2010A; Adamczyk, 2018).

The first major challenge for Poland in the Balkans following its EU accession was the matter of recognising the independence of Kosovo (Pawłowski, 2008). Pristina declared independence in February 2008. This issue divided EU members; some recognised the new state, others did not (Pawłowski, 2016; Pawłowski, 2018). This internal division translated into a decision to adopt an individual stance rather than a joint declaration of EU countries. Polish politicians were also divided. According to A. Balcer, there were

5 Besides V4 states, the group comprises: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, Finland, Slovenia, Sweden, and Italy (before Brexit, the UK was included on this list).

concerns "... that this act could be treated by Russia as a pretext to play the separatist card against the former USSR states" (Balcer, 2019). The government in Warsaw feared that this could be a pretext for Russia to recognise Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Transnistria. There were also concerns that recognising Kosovo would have a negative impact on relations with Serbia, which might seek Russia's support and therefore step away from the European Union⁶. Once again, the Polish government adopted the passive, wait-and-see attitude. Only after the USA and the largest EU countries (Germany, the UK, and France) decided to recognise Kosovo, did Poland follow suit⁷. Poland officially argued its stance with concerns and responsibility for peace and security in the region but, at the same time, the government in Warsaw declared that the recognition could not be treated as a precedent. It was a one-off act and could not be emulated by other countries (Wiśniewski, 2017). At the same time a decision not to establish diplomatic relations with Kosovo was made. To this day Poland has not had an embassy in Pristina and relations between the countries take place at a very low official level. By doing that, Poland wanted to send a message of support and friendship to the government in Belgrade. In order to partially stabilise the situation in the Balkans following Kosovo's declaration of independence, NATO decided on Albania and Croatia's accession into its structures in 2009. Poland unquestionably supported their membership.

With the financial crisis in Europe in 2009, relations between the European Union and the Balkan states began to gradually weaken, thus Poland's involvement was also limited. The dependence and proportionality between the EU and Poland in the implementation of the Balkan direction was clearly visible. The more the EU policy towards the region weakened, the more lethargic and stagnant Polish diplomacy became. Poland, despite being able to influence the decision-making process in the EU and shape the Common Foreign and Security Policy, did not demonstrate any initiative and creativity in the field of Balkan policy, but remained rather passive and merely declaratory. The Polish government focused on the Eastern Partnership and did not establish its own policy towards the Balkans, it only declared its support for the projects of countries more interested in the region. A crucial event at that stage was the accession of two large Balkan states to the EU - Bulgaria and Romania. Their Europeanisation process, resulting from EU and NATO membership, as well as their predictability and credibility, meant that they ceased to be considered strictly as Balkan states. Relations with these countries have been integrated into the developed cooperation mechanisms within the European Union.

Polish Diplomacy towards the Balkans from 2011 to Modern Times

The Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union, which was due in the second half of 2011, presented Poland with an opportunity to alter its then-current approach towards the Balkans. The government in Warsaw realised that resuming that function obligates the presiding state to take a holistic approach towards the implementation of the interests of all Member States in the organisation, and not to focus only on its own, specific goals (Podgórzńska 2012). Therefore, one of the main priorities of the Polish Presidency was the process of European Union enlargement, which, undeniably,

6 In lieu of not recognising Kosovo by Russia in 2008, Serbia sold its petroleum company NIP to Russian state-owned Gazprom Neft, which made it dependent on Russia in the energy sector.

7 Kosovo's independence was not recognised by Spain, Slovakia, Romania, Greece, nor Cyprus.

was also addressed to the Balkan states. In this respect, Poland basically continued the goals set by Hungary, which had previously held the same function. The government in Budapest supported the accession process of its neighbours Croatia and Serbia with great determination, and handed over the finalisation of certain stages to Poland as a proverbial gift. While preparing for the chairman role of the Council of the European Union, Poland, in terms of Balkan policy, planned to achieve three goals: sign the accession treaty with Croatia, start accession negotiations with Montenegro and grant Serbia candidate status (Żornaczuk, 2019). It should be emphasised that Poland attempted to duly prepare for the implementation of the said objectives by intensifying diplomatic efforts and organising official visits and meetings of the highest Polish officials with their counterparts in the Western Balkan countries. As part of that diplomatic mobilisation, Prime Minister Donald Tusk visited Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, while the Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski visited Albania as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Żornaczuk, 2019). Subsequently, in Polish-Macedonian relations the formula of the Skopje Conference was established, the purpose of which was to share with the Macedonians the accession negotiation experience of Polish officials⁸. As part of the training project, the Enlargement Academy was initiated (Domaradzki & Fronczak, 2018). At the same time, Poland had to ensure a proper pro-accession campaign among those Member States whose societies felt to a great extent the effects of the financial crisis and symptoms of enlargement fatigue.

Not all the goals set by Poland were achieved. The signing of the accession treaty with Croatia on 9th December 2011 was undoubtedly a success (Babić, 2012). The Polish Presidency attempted to bring more splendour to Poland and sign the treaty in Warsaw, but eventually the ceremony was held in Brussels. The other two goals set by Poland were not obtained and were transferred to the subsequent Presidencies of the Council of the European Union. It did not, however, cloud such indisputable successes of the Polish Presidency as the treaty with Croatia was, nor did it taint the Eastern Partnership Summit with the EU, which was organised in Poland's capital city. There is no denying that the Polish government, by declaring its willingness to pursue the interests of all the Member States, devoted the majority of its energy to the eastern dimension. After fulfilling its mission in the EU Council, Poland was slightly less enthusiastic about relations with the Balkan states, but used its experience on the Visegrad Group forum, where, during its Presidency at the turn of 2012 and 2013, meetings with the Romanian and Bulgarian foreign ministers were organised which clearly focused on the opportunities of intensifying cooperation with the Western Balkans. At that time, V4 members decided to significantly increase the budget of the International Visegrad Fund, which financed grants *inter alia* in education, culture, and tourism in Western Balkan states⁹. It should be emphasised that the effects of these undertakings were, however, quite limited and dependent upon the financial capabilities of the V4 members.

Despite Poland's visible commitment to building relations with the Balkan states during its Presidency in the EU Council, this direction was not really taken into account in the priorities of Polish diplomacy in 2012-2016 (Priorities of Polish Foreign Policy,

8 The Skopje Conference was based on the Utrecht Conference – when Dutch officials shared their accession experiences with Polish officials preparing for EU accession negotiations.

9 In 2012 the Fund's budget amounted to 7.5 mln Euro. The contributions were paid equally by all V4 members.

2012). The cooperation with the Western Balkan states was merely limited to statements of support for the European Union's enlargement policy and applied only to Ukraine, Moldova, the South Caucasus and Turkey. Poland returned to its former passive and declarative policy model, i.e., making its relations with the Balkans dependent on cooperative progress within the European Union. The said translated into endorsing the commencement of negotiation talks with Montenegro and the granting of candidate status to Serbia in 2012. In the latter case, Poland expressed its concern about Belgrade's overly close relations with Moscow.

The last major event in EU policy on the southern flank in recent years was the accession of Croatia to the European Union in 2013. At that time, Poland declared its support for the EU project of the Baltic-Adriatic corridor aimed at building key rail, road, sea, air, and energy connections between Poland and Croatia (Podgórzńska, 2013). It was somewhat a sign from the Polish government that it was interested in going beyond the traditional directions of Polish diplomacy from the East-West axis to the North-South axis. Following its successful accession, Croatia admittedly distanced itself from being identified as a Balkan state, but the project was open to any possible extension further into the Balkans.

The deepening financial and economic crisis in the European Union forced Member States to focus their efforts on combating the crisis's consequences. Enlargement fatigue became significantly more visible among the societies of the "old" EU. During that difficult period, relations with the Western Balkan states were set aside. The President of the European Commission Jean-Claude Juncker, at the start of his five-year term in 2014, stated that the EU did not plan any enlargement before 2019 (Adamczyk, 2018).

The European Commission's stance negatively affected the accession aspirations of the Balkan states. The membership perspective had been the greatest motivator for them to implement reforms based on EU criteria. Postponing the implementation of the enlargement policy and plunging into the economic crisis undermined the EU's authority in the eyes of Balkan politicians, who began to seek alternatives to the EU's direction. Even more so since an additional player emerged in that part of Europe - China with its "16 +1" initiative - which, alongside Russia, tried to build influence in the region (Olszewski & Chojan, 2017; Balcer, 2019). Relations between the EU and the Western Balkans weakened, which translated into Polish diplomacy having less interest in the region at that time.

A clear change in Polish foreign policy took place after the Law and Justice party assumed power at the end of 2015. The then existing policy based on the East-West axis and close cooperation between Warsaw and Berlin on European affairs was abandoned. The new government, on the other hand, chose members of the Visegrad Group and the UK as its main coalition partners¹⁰. It was ambitiously declared that as part of the European policy, Warsaw would develop North-South relations and a new project, the Three Seas Initiative, was presented, which was to strengthen cooperation between the EU Member States located between the Baltic, Black and Adriatic seas. Twelve countries joined the cooperation: V4 members, the Baltic states, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, and

¹⁰ As an EU member, the UK was a committed proponent of the organisation's enlargement incorporating the Balkan states.

Romania. Under the initiative, which was also supported by the USA, the construction of a dense infrastructure network: transport, energy, and telecommunications was expected (Sępniewski, 2018; Ukielski, 2018). The geographic scope of the initiative reached as far as Croatia and Bulgaria, but it cannot be ruled out that in the future it may encompass other Balkan countries. Post-2015, Poland also intensified its bilateral relations with Serbia and Albania by actively participating at the forum of the Friends of Enlargement Group (Wiśniewski, 2017). Serbia remains particularly important for Poland since it is the largest Balkan country outside the EU, and which is susceptible to Russian influence (Szpala, 2014). Upon the Polish initiative in 2017, the Belgrade Conference, based on the Skopje Conference, was established, the aim of which is the cooperation between officials of both countries as well as Poland's support of Serbia's efforts in its accession discussions with the EU by sharing its negotiating experience (Domaradzki & Fronczak, 2018). The following year, the Tirana Conference was launched. Poland also supported Montenegro's efforts to become a NATO member. This process was finalised in 2017, despite the provocations organised by Russia in Podgorica (Kuczyński, 2019).

In 2018, the European Commission attempted to recover from the enlargement crisis and announced a new strategy towards the Western Balkans. That initiative was due to the fact that relations between the countries of the region and the European Union were noticeably weakening, and at the same time the activity of other actors, whose presence threatened the stabilisation of the situation in the Balkans, could thus threaten European security. The European Commission announced that it would strengthen cooperation through the systematic inclusion of the Balkan states in the legal and institutional system of the European Union in the sectoral dimension. Establishing a sectoral network of connections would anchor the Balkan states to the EU's system of influence and, hence, weaken Russia, China, and Turkey's possibilities to influence. The EC announced that Montenegro and Serbia could join the EU by 2025 (Szpala, 2018). The European Commission's new strategy was based on the experience of the Berlin Process¹¹, initiated in 2014 by a Germany concerned about the potential effects of a slowdown in the enlargement process in the Balkans. In 2018, after the announcement of the new EC strategy, Poland decided to join the group of countries participating in the Berlin Process, which complemented the Three Seas Initiative to a great extent. The Polish Prime Minister also took part in the first EU-Western Balkans summit in Sofia in 2003, during which the membership perspectives for the region were reaffirmed.

Poland's involvement in Balkan affairs was also manifested by hosting, as part of its annual presidency, the 2019 Berlin Process Summit in Poznań. The works of the Summit focussed on key areas which were to tie Western Balkans with the EU: security and migration, social and economic development, infrastructure cohesion (transport, energy), a digital agenda, good relations with neighbours, and supporting the reconciliation process. The flagship project of the Berlin Process was the launch of the Regional Economic Area, i.e., the creation of a common market in the Western Balkans similar to the EU, with the freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital, an area that could be easily integrated into the EU common market.

¹¹ A number of EU Member States participated in the process: Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, France, Greece, Germany, Poland, Slovenia, Italy and Montenegro, as well as Serbia, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. The following EU institutions were also involved: The European Commission, the European Investment Bank, and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The organisation of the Berlin Process summit in Poznań undoubtedly demonstrates Poland's will to engage in EU-Balkan relations. However, one can ask whether such an action is merely a temporary one, resulting from current policy and the need to show the "good side" of the Polish government; a government which has not been well perceived recently in the EU due to the rule of law issues. These doubts result from the fact that in the government document "The Polish Foreign Policy Strategy for 2017-2021" the Balkan direction does not actually exist, only a general will to support the EU enlargement process is expressed as was the case with the previous strategy under the former government (The Polish Foreign Policy Strategy, 2017).

Summing up the last stage of shaping Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkans, it should be emphasised that it still results from the European Union's general policy towards this region. There have, however, been some initiatives that may prove Poland's greater involvement, but one can venture a guess that the Polish government was rather forced to do so by the situation in the European Union. The foregoing refers to the Polish EU Council Presidency in 2011, the Presidency of the V4 in 2012 and 2016 as well as of the Berlin Process in 2019. These initiatives, however, do not affirm the projection, in-depth reflection and continuity in Polish policy towards the region. The Berlin Process continuation and Poland's involvement in it was ceased due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Poland, similar to other European countries, focused its endeavours on combating the effects and preventing the spread of the pandemic, hence, set aside the shaping of relations with the Balkan states. This does not mean that Warsaw has completely forgotten about its Balkan partners; Poland was one of the countries that sent a transport of medical products indispensable to combat the pandemic to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia¹² (Poland helps Western Balkans fight coronavirus, 2020). It was rather a symbolic gesture showing that the government in Warsaw was trying to maintain good relations with this region. Without any doubt, as long as the pandemic is not brought under control, the interests of Poland and European countries in the Balkans will remain limited.

Conclusions

When analysing the evolution of Polish policy towards the Balkan region following 1989, it should be stated that it played a secondary role among the goals of Polish diplomacy defined by the government. Its implementation was completely subordinated to strategic goals, i.e., Poland's accession to the EU and NATO, and then building a strong position in these structures. Security guarantees resulting from the presence in NATO and the EU were necessary due to the unstable situation across the eastern border, and it was the situation in Eastern Europe that Poland perceived as its greatest threat. This approach resulted in the lack of independence towards the Balkans and emulating the positions of the strongest and most important countries in Euro-Atlantic structures by Polish diplomacy. On the one hand, it was a pragmatic position, but, on the other, it proved a self-marginalisation of our role and position in the region. Polish policy was too passive, too short-term, and lacking a long-term strategy and reflection. Even when Polish diplomacy did become more active in the Balkans, it was only temporary and it is difficult

12 In May 2020 Poland sent nearly 70 tons of disinfecting liquid and surgical masks there.

to find some coherence, consistency and a well-planned long-term perspective in these actions. The lack of interest in the region can be somewhat explained by the absence of strong economic cooperation between Poland and the Balkan states. However, taking into account the fact that it is an extremely conflict-ridden region with unregulated territorial, ethnic, and religious issues, which pose a threat to third countries, and, therefore, to the entire European Union and its unity, Polish policy should definitely be criticised. Poland should have become more involved in Balkan affairs even if only for the sake of its own security and to limit Russia's influence in the region. Warsaw should have been one of the initiators of EU projects in the Balkans. It should have intensified efforts to contribute to enlargement, and not only express its support. The weakening of the EU's influence in the Balkan region enhances Russia, China, and Turkey's chances of strengthening their influences there (Olszewski & Chojan, 2017; Kopyś, 2018; Balcer, 2019), namely those countries that do not care about the democratisation and stabilisation of the region, but rather on escalating disputes between them and benefiting from the corrupted system. Therefore, Polish diplomacy should provide extensive support to the Balkan states in those areas in which it succeeded, i.e., in political, economic and legal transformation, combating corruption and organised crime, accession negotiations and benefitting from EU funds. If Poland is unable to offer such assistance, it should use its membership in the EU and NATO to consistently initiate and implement such actions.

Peer-review: Externally peer-reviewed.

Conflict of Interest: The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support: The author declared that this study has received no financial support

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