



REUNITING WITH EUROPE: POLAND'S EU PATH

Irina Tkeshelashvili,
Iwona Reichardt

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About the authors

Iwona Reichardt is the Deputy Editor-in-Chief for New Eastern Europe and member of the management board of the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe, the publisher of NEE. She is also an assistant professor at the Jagiellonian University in Kraków. She has a PhD in Political Science from the Jagiellonian University. Her previous experience includes Foreign Policy magazine in Washington DC, and policy analysis work with the World Bank. Iwona is the author of numerous academic and policy papers published in both Polish and English and the co-author of the book *Czy kobiety uratują świat? Feministyczna polityka zagraniczna* (Will women save the world? Feminist foreign policy).

Irina Tkeshelashvili is a young leader from Georgia associated fellow with the College of Eastern Europe and a fellow of L. Kirkland Scholarship Program, Aspen Institute of Romania and International Parliamentary Program of Polish Sejm. She focuses on Georgia, Russia's influence in the region and on development of civil society and NGO sector in the Eastern Partnership countries.

About REWEU

The project (Re)uniting the East and West: Reflections on the 2004 EU enlargement (REWEU) The project is focused on the commemoration of the 2004 “big bang” EU enlargement on the occasion of its 20th anniversary in May 2024. Through the combination of local, national and international public events, collection of historical memories and narratives, studies on impacts of 2004 enlargement, costs of non-enlargement and role of women in the process, as well as exhibitions and media articles, the project contributes to wider contemporary efforts of EU memory politics. The project focuses on eight selected EU countries, four from the older EU Member States which were part of the Union’s decision-making processes leading up to the big enlargement (Belgium, Finland, Greece and Italy) and four newly acceding countries (Cyprus, Czech Republic, Latvia and Poland). The project is funded by the European Union through the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values Programme (CERV) under the European Remembrance strand.

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Introduction

Poland became a member of the European Union (EU) on May 1, 2004. This event was preceded by over a decade of preparations which were undertaken by successive Polish governments, public institutions, the third sector and the society at large. As a result of all these endeavours, Poland's integration into the European Union now stands as a transformative chapter in the country's modern history. Being an EU member has thus politically, economically, and socially reshaped the Polish state.

According to the report of the Polish Economic Institute, Poland's real GDP per capita (like that of Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) is now 27% higher than it would have been in a counterfactual scenario without EU accession.¹ With the GDP showing one of the highest growth among EU countries for which data was collected by Eurostat in 2024,² Poland has also emerged as one of the key regional players. As such it has become an example for other non-EU post-communist countries that are now aspiring to become EU members.

Despite these successes, Poland's path to EU membership was not free of challenges. In the 1990s and early 2000s, the decision of the Polish authorities to join other European states in their community of values and economic space where free exchange of goods and services is the main principle was both accepted by the society at large and questioned by some of its segments and political forces. However, while the voices of discontent have always been smaller

¹ Dominik Kopiński, Jędrzej Lubasiński, Bartosz Michalski, Marcelina Pilszyk, Ignacy Świącicki, Marek Wąsiński, *The Big Bang Enlargement, 20 Years of Central Europe's Membership in the EU*, Polish Economic Institute, Warsaw, April 2024, p. 8.

² "Poland's Economy Currently the Fastest-Growing in the EU," *Warsaw Business Journal*, August 2024 <https://wbj.pl/polands-economy-currently-the-fastest-growing-in-the-eu/post/143113#:~:text=In%20the%20second%20quarter%2C%20Poland's,terms%20of%20acceleration%20economic%20growth>.

in numbers than those of EU supporters, their proponents have sowed some confusion among the voters regarding the purpose and benefits of Poland's membership in the EU. As a result, Poland's history of EU membership is one of large economic gains, which are recognized by the society at large, as well as the questioning of the values of the European community which are presented to some segments of the Polish society as a "threat" to their country's sovereignty and national identity.

Return to Europe

In 1989, as a result of the Round Table talks between communist authorities and the democratic opposition, Poland started its political transition. It held the first semi-free elections and formed the first non-communist government led by Tadeusz Mazowiecki. Under his leadership, the new government introduced a Western-oriented foreign policy that allowed for a future integration with the European community. The launching of the political transformation was immediately followed by economic reforms which were necessary to bring back capitalism to Poland. Introduced by Leszek Balcerowicz, the minister of finance in Mazowiecki's government, these reforms primarily focused on privatization and market liberalization. The reforms proved necessary in the later process of EU integration, yet their strongly neoliberal character, especially in the early stage of the transformation, remains a topic of criticism in Poland until today. As such it has been efficiently exploited by the right-wing and populist political forces who use the memory of the 1990s to steer the emotions of some segments of the society. Specifically, they tend to manipulate the voting decisions of the people whose families economically suffered as a result of the transformation. They gear them into perceiving any liberal project, including the EU, as economically and socially harmful.

From the beginning of the democratic transition, the Polish political elite saw Poland's membership in the European Union as a strategic goal. The decision to join the EU was thus framed as a historical opportunity for the country that experienced war and oppression in the 20th century. It was meant to mark Poland's "return to Europe". The latter was perceived as an area of democracy, peace and stability. Thus, throughout the 1990s, successive Polish governments strongly emphasized Poland's cultural and historical ties with the West, which had started in the 10th century when Mieszko I, the first ruler of Poland, converted to Christianity. This long history of being part of the European civilization was said to have been disrupted after the Second World War when Poland fell under the Soviet domination which lasted for almost half a century.

Throughout the 1990s, successive Polish governments strongly emphasized Poland's cultural and historical ties with the West, which had started in the 10th century.

Admittedly, there was a large political consensus around the pro-integration rhetoric which was built around this historical argument. Its use was recorded in the speeches of the members of the first non-communist government in the early stage of the transformation as well

as those who formed the post-communist government and held power at the time of Poland's EU accession. Thus, when the EU negotiations came finally to an end in 2002, the then Prime Minister, Leszek Miller, said the following words: "We have removed the heavy burden of the Yalta agreement and the postwar division of Europe. From Polish Solidarity, which won freedom and democracy for Central and Eastern Europe, we are approaching the true solidarity of Europe and of Europeans."³

³ Leszek Miller quoted in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12 December 2002.

Given the state of Poland's economy in the late 1980s and early 1990s, it was clear that meeting the requirements of *acquis communautaire* would constitute a large challenge. The outdated economy had to be further readjusted while methods of goods and services exchange needed an introduction of new procedures and highly sophisticated standardization. This process required not only adequate know-how but also an increasingly more educated and skilled labour force. The same could be said about the public sector which needed to readjust its functioning to European models of public administration. Such transition required not only procedural changes and the introduction of new practices but also training of personnel who needed to acquire new skills and increase professional competence. To achieve that, the Polish government needed to introduce adequate reforms (of crucial importance in this regard was the reform of public administration) and keep the society informed that introduced changes would bring the desired outcome – a modernized state with a well-functioning administration.

Yet, at the time of the introduction of these necessary reforms, the Polish society was still experiencing the hardships of economic transition, with many people seeing their standard of living deteriorating as its result. To prevent the situation that an economic argument would negatively influence the pro-integration rhetoric and affect the course of the reforms, the authorities opted for presenting EU membership as a huge economic opportunity for Poland. It was meant to benefit both the state and the society as a whole. Therefore, government agencies, including the Committee for European Integration, whose competence was Poland's preparation for EU membership, were all engaged in communicating the advantages of free trade between Poland and other EU states.

This pro-integration rhetoric of the political elite found its support in liberal and left-wing media. Among the outlets with the greatest coverage of EU preparations were the two largest Polish dailies, *Gazeta Wyborcza* and *Rzeczpospolita*, and

opinion-making weeklies, *Polityka* and *Wprost*. However, the analyses of their content and presentation of Poland's EU perspective point to some weaknesses in terms of quality and journalistic standards. As supporters of the EU integration themselves, these outlets did not manage to present the integration process in an objective manner, with its achievements and challenges. Their journalists exploited positive, pro-European emotions, thereby frequently avoiding difficult topics, including the fears that some groups of the society felt regarding Poland's membership in the EU. The largest of such groups were the Polish farmers who feared competition from their more modern counterparts in Western European states and whose emotions were strongly exploited by populist political parties, especially the populist and agrarian Self-Defence, established by Andrzej Lepper, a charismatic and controversial figure who led it until his death in 2011.

The pro-European bias of liberal and left-wing newspapers and magazines, although in line with the authorities' rhetoric, showed thus a tendency to breach established standards of objective

The pro-integration rhetoric of the political elite found its support in liberal and left-wing media.

journalism. Instead, it allowed for such expressions as "our integration" and "our EU accession", suggesting that support for the EU was univocal. Equally negative assessment should be given to the quality of coverage of the accession process that primarily focused on large and spectacular political events, without adequate analysis of the EU's internal functioning. Thus, it can be said that while preparing the Polish society for the EU accession, pro-integration media in Poland did not manage to maintain their own professional standards, giving room to emotions instead of educating the society about the actual process and consequences of the accession.

A similar trend was observed in the coverage of the accession by moderate Catholic press, especially those newspapers and magazines which had been

launched under communism and which were geared towards the so-called Catholic intelligentsia. However, here the interpretation of Poland's membership in the EU was more rooted in an axiological system and deeply linked with the Christian tradition as well as the teaching of the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, despite some reservations, these media outlets supported Poland's membership in the EU, seeing it also as the country's strategic goal and historical opportunity.

The opposite viewpoint, namely expressing Euroscepticism, was presented by the right wing and some, more radical, Catholic media. Many of these outlets were set up in the 1990s and their outreach and influence grew over time. The anti-EU rhetoric of these media was primarily based on very emotional arguments which portrayed the EU as a "threat" to Poland's sovereignty, national identity and especially the well-being of Polish families. Opposite to liberal and left-wing media, the pro-integration coverage was purposefully avoided here. Among the most well-known and most vocal outlets with openly anti-EU and anti-Western rhetoric, was Radio Maryja, a Catholic radio station established by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, and *Nasz Dziennik*, a daily newspaper, also set up by the same priest. For a short period of time prior to Poland's EU accession, the anti-EU narrative of these two outlets was only somewhat tamed by the Church hierarchy, yet it returned with full force almost immediately after the referendum.

Throughout the process of EU integration, the civil society and the NGO sector played a significant role. Among the main actors involved in the pre-referendum and accession preparation works were the Warsaw-based Batory Foundation and the Institute of Public Affairs. Both institutions, although independent, were connected with the liberal governments. Their leaders and staff included former anti-communist activists who became the architects of Poland's democratic transformation. Despite the large achievements of these institutions in the realm of the preparatory work for Poland's EU membership, their close connections with George Soros's Open Society Foundation as well as other foreign grantors

generated criticism of their privileged position in the then-budding Polish third sector. Their pro-Western orientation and support towards the EU were criticized by the right-wing political forces which portrayed these NGOs as representatives of foreign, and not Polish, interests.

Many NGOs filled up the gap that the Polish state proved unable to fill, especially in the area of women's rights.

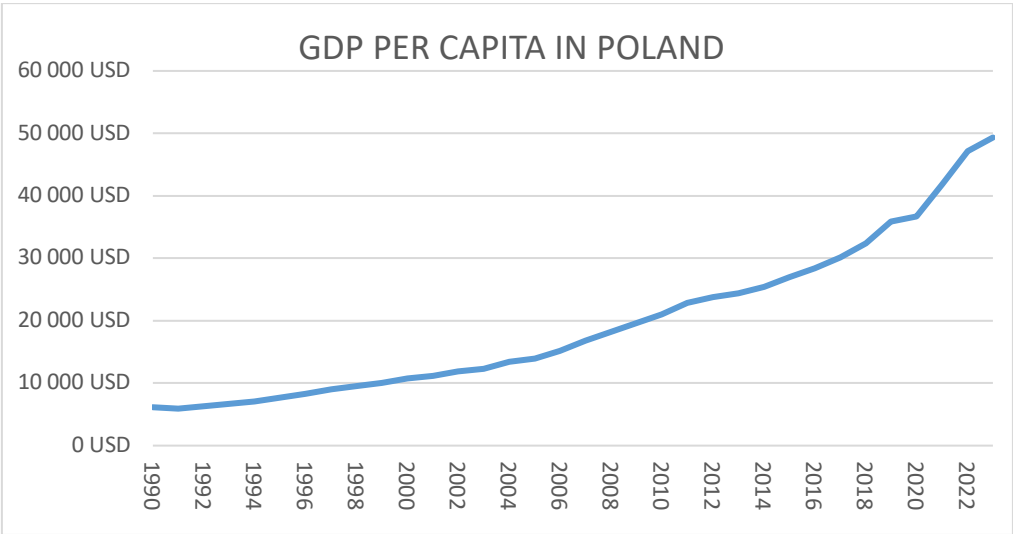
There were also numerous smaller NGOs which were set up in the early 1990s and spread throughout the country that contributed to preparing Poland for its membership in the EU. Through their

work, although not always directly, they were promoting European values and Poland's integration with the community of Western values. Among them were women's rights organizations, environmental NGOs, non-profit cultural institutions and many others. Many of these organizations filled up the gap that the Polish state proved unable to fill. This was especially true in the area of women's rights, which – since the beginning of the system transformation but also at the time of EU integration – were either neglected or restricted in Poland. It also needs to be stated that the pro-integration activities of the third sector had started before the actual process of EU negotiations was launched. The work of Polish NGOs, especially those focusing on environmental policies, goes back to the 1980s. The EU preparation processes surely accelerated the speed of this work and offered these organizations new opportunities which they adequately used to increase their reach and influence.

Benefits and costs of enlargement

In economic terms, EU integration helped Poland achieve impressive and sustained growth. As a result, Poland has now become one of the fastest-growing

EU economies. Between 2004 and 2024, the country's GDP per capita nearly quadrupled.



Source: World Bank

Without a doubt, this would not have been possible without access to the EU's Single Market which continues to be highlighted as one of the key advantages of Poland's EU membership. As a result of becoming part of EU's Single Market Polish businesses are now able to compete in a large and wealthy space of economic exchange. From the very beginning of the membership, Polish enterprises have taken advantage of this opportunity, initially by developing or expanding business relations with companies from neighbouring states: Germany and Czechia. Without a doubt access to Germany and its strong economy has proven one of the largest benefits of Poland's membership in the EU. Until today, Germany remains the main importer of goods and services to Poland and the main destination of Polish exports of goods and services. However, this economic cooperation has also generated criticism of the right-wing forces which present it in terms of "economic expansion" and "German colonization" which suggests that it was Germany and not Poland that has benefited from the EU's free trade.

As expected, EU membership has brought an increase in foreign direct investments, which in turn facilitated modernization of Polish industries and

offered new employment opportunities for Polish workers. Overall, since 2004 Poland has attracted over 270 billion US dollars in such investments, which in majority came from EU member states.⁴ Equally importantly, as a new EU member, Poland has benefited from direct financial transfers coming from the shared EU budget. It is estimated that since 2004 Poland has received nearly 246 billion euro of such funds while contributing an estimated 83.8 billion euro to the same budget in the same period of time.⁵ Without these funds, Poland's modernization of the state and economy would have taken much more time and possibly encountered more obstacles and social discontent.

Visibly, the financial support that Poland has received from the EU for infrastructure development, agriculture, and regional cohesion projects was of crucial importance. Applying these resources has also allowed for a gradual

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decrease in unemployment which at the time of accession was much higher than the EU average and which was one of the long-term consequences of market transformation. With time this drop in unemployment was followed by gradual increases in wages. Estimated to have risen by 138% since the accession, today's Polish wages stand above the regional average and are one of the reasons why the Polish economy is looked upon by neighbour societies.⁶ Yet it needs to be admitted that Poland's success in increasing workers' wages, especially in the last decade, is not the result of the EU accession only. Salary raises and adjustment to

⁴ Dominik Kopiński, Jędrzej Lubasiński, Bartosz Michalski, Marcelina Piłszyk, Ignacy Święcicki, Marek Wąsiński, op.cit., p. 29.

⁵ Adriana Sas, *Poland's contributions to and receipts from the EU budget 2004-2023*, July 2024 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1135294/poland-s-contributions-to-and-receipts-from-the-eu-budget/>

⁶ Kancelaria Prezesa Rady Ministrów, *20 lat Polski w Unii Europejskiej – Bilans gospodarczych efektów członkostwa*, Warszawa 2024, p. 16, https://20lat.eu/images/Raport_20_lat_PL_w_UE.pdf

Western levels of workers' compensation have also been the product of the overall changes in Poland's labour market as well as the decisions of the two successive Polish governments to increase the minimum wage.

The economic benefits, which Polish society has enjoyed in the last two decades as a result of its EU membership, are something that the liberal and left-wing political elites, now in power, have always prided themselves on in their political rhetoric. A good illustration of this pride are the speeches given at subsequent anniversaries of Poland's EU membership. Thus, in 2024, when Poland was celebrating 20 years of its membership in the European Union, the Minister for Regional Development, Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz said the following words: "No other country in the region has taken advantage of its presence in the European Union as we have, it is the success of Poles."⁷

The opposite view of the EU membership's balance is presented by the right-wing parties. The populist Law and Justice which has governed Poland twice since the country's accession to the EU, first from 2005 to 2007 and later from 2015 to 2023, has become known for its scepticism towards the European project, despite the obvious economic gains for Poland. During its eight-year rule, this political party entered a collision course with EU institutions, which it accused of limiting Poland's sovereignty. The conflict between the Law and Justice government and the EU was centred on the judicial reforms introduced in Poland between 2015 and 2023 and which breached European laws. Consequently, Poland became labelled the EU's trouble child following the steps of Hungary, another post-communist Central European state that had joined the EU in 2004.

Despite Law and Justice's assertive position towards the EU, which negatively affected Poland's relations with the EU and limited its funding opportunities as a

⁷ Ministerstwo Funduszy i Polityki Regionalnej, *Min. Pełczyńska-Nałęcz o 20 latach Polski w UE: żadne inne państwo regionu nie wykorzystało tak jak my obecności w Unii Europejskiej, to sukces Polek i Polaków*, 30 April 2024.

result, until December 2024, this political party kept its distance from any “Polexit” initiatives that had been launched on the right side of the political spectrum. This practice is reported to have changed for the first time by Karol Nawrocki – Law and Justice candidate for president in 2025 – who on the day of the inauguration of Poland’s Presidency in the European Union marched with protesting farmers who were carrying anti-EU banners and expressing their opposition to EU environmental policies.⁸ After being publicly criticized by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Nawrocki explained his position towards the EU on platform X in the following post: “I am for Poland in a united Europe. A strong Poland that can stop the ideas of your political friends that are harmful to us, such as the migration pact, the Mercosur agreement or the Green Deal.”⁹

All reliable opinion polls show that support for the EU continues to stay at a high level in Poland and the majority of the population recognizes the economic gains from EU membership.

These words show that just like Law and Justice politicians during their eight years of wielding power in Poland, candidate Karol Nawrocki understands that questioning Poland’s EU membership will not bring him political success in his presidential campaign. All reliable opinion polls show that support for the EU

continues to stay at a high level in Poland and the majority of the population recognizes the economic gains that the EU membership has brought to their country.¹⁰ Therefore, running a national political campaign on a “Polexit” ticket would for sure be very risky.

“Polexit” is yet the proposal offered to the voters by the far-right nationalistic party – Konfederacja (Confederation). Its politicians primarily appeal to young voters,

⁸ Bogusław Chrabota, “Karol Nawrocki – Król Rolników”, <https://www.rp.pl/publicystyka/art41646381-boguslaw-chrabota-karol-nawrocki-krol-rolnikow>

⁹ <https://x.com/Nawrocki25>

¹⁰ Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (CBOS), 2024, *Dwadzieścia lat członkostwa Polski w UE*, p. 2.

fuelling xenophobic and anti-Western sentiments. Not only are they against the next EU enlargement and Ukraine's integration with the community (representatives of this party stand behind the farmers' protests that are periodically organized at the Polish-Ukrainian border as well as on the streets of different Polish cities) but also against the EU environmental policies and axiological assumptions. In its assessment of Poland's membership, Konfederacja avoids pointing to Poland's economic success. Instead, it argues that at the time of accession, the EU was presented as a "freedom project".¹¹ This is a reference to the unrestricted freedom of movement of people, goods, services and capital which constitutes the foundation of the European project and which – in the view of Konfederacja's leader, Krzysztof Bosak – has become restrained "by political requirements that member states need to meet".¹² Despite this rhetoric, which contributes to very heated discussions on Poland's membership, it is clear that even this party restrains from postulating Poland's leaving the EU. Thus, when asked by media about his party's position on European integration, Bosak says that while Konfederacja remains critical of the integration process it accepts the fact that Poland is a member state.¹³

All that being said, it is not surprising that in 2021, the Economist magazine in its well-known Charlemagne column published a text with a provocative titled "Poland is a problem for the EU precisely because it will not leave. Unlike Britain, Poland will remain inside the tent causing trouble."¹⁴ While at the time of the writing of this text Poland is rebuilding its tarnished relations with the EU, stressing the benefits it obtains from being a member of the community, and its

¹¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=404436942296449>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ <https://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Konfederacja-chce-wyprowadzic-Polske-z-UE-Bosak-Respektujemy-wole-Polakow-8734783.html>

¹⁴ Charlemagne, "Poland is a problem for the EU precisely because it will not leave. Unlike Britain, Poland will remain inside the tent causing trouble".

<https://www.economist.com/europe/2021/10/14/poland-is-a-problem-for-the-eu-precisely-because-it-will-not-leave>

commitment to the European project, it is clear that criticism towards prospective EU enlargement and the currently introduced environmental policies is more popular and adequately exploited by Eurosceptic political forces. It is thus possible that at a certain moment in time, Polish politicians will start presenting Poland's membership in the EU more as a cost than an economic benefit, as it is viewed now.

Yes for EU membership and accession referendum

Overall, the pro-EU rhetoric, which has expressed the viewpoint of the democratically-minded political elite since the 1990s, has been accepted by a large part of the society. Opinion polls show that in the 1990s, social support for Poland's EU membership never fell below 50%.¹⁵ However, the broad consensus regarding EU membership did not mean that no groups expressed their objections to Poland joining the European community. This was the case of the conservative members of the society, especially those living in rural areas.¹⁶ Politically, these groups had their representation in the Polish Peasant Party, the socially conservative League of Polish Families, and the populist Self-Defence. Yet, it was only the League of Polish Families, created in 2001 and strongly supported by Father Tadeusz Rydzyk, that steadfastly opposed EU membership. Two years before Poland joined the EU, the League's leader, Roman Giertych, had said: "Accession to the EU means that our poor country will remain poor. We know (...) that there will be no serious funds to be invested in Poland by the EU."¹⁷

¹⁵ Centrum Badania Opinii Publicznej (CBOS), 2024, op.cit., p. 4.

¹⁶ Izabela Surwillo, Karen Henderson, Gabriella Lazaridis, 2010, "Between Euroscepticism and Eurosupport: The Attitudes of Urban and Rural Populations in Poland 2000–2008", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 62(9), 1503–1525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2010.515796>

¹⁷ <https://forsal.pl/swiat/unia-europejska/artykuly/9497474,sceptycyzm-i-kumulacja-lekow-czyli-jak-polska-wchodzila-do-ue.html>

Thus, to ensure that the majority of Poles would take part and vote in favour of the EU membership in the referendum planned for 2003, the post-communist authorities reached out to the Catholic Church. As a result of these negotiations and thanks to the pro-EU position of the Vatican (at that time headed by the Polish pope John Paul the Second, who had a large moral authority in Poland), the Catholic clergy started to openly support Poland's EU integration, encouraging participation and pro-membership vote in the referendum. Most importantly, shortly before the EU referendum was held, John Paul the Second arrived in Poland where he delivered a speech in which he famously said: "Europe needs Poland. Poland needs Europe."¹⁸

In a country where the Catholic religion is declared by the majority of the population, these words brought the results that the government had desired. Of the 58.85% of voters who participated in the referendum, an overwhelming majority (77.41%) said "yes" to Poland's EU membership.¹⁹ The price that the government paid the Church for its support took the form of maintaining restrictive abortion legislations, which were introduced in Poland in the 1990s

Shortly before the EU referendum, pope John Paul the Second delivered a speech in Poland stating: "Europe needs Poland. Poland needs Europe."

under strong pressure from the Catholic Church. In other words, the price for entering the European Union was paid by Polish women whose reproductive rights remain highly restricted until today.²⁰ This painful truth was admitted 20 years later by a liberal journalist and historian who

¹⁸ *Vatican News*, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/kosciol/news/2023-11/sw-jan-pawel-ii-a-ue.html>

¹⁹ Corinne Deloy, Helen Levy, *All together the Poles say "yes" to their country's entry into the European Union*, Robert Schuman Foundation, June 2003 <https://www.robert-schuman.eu/en/monitor/205-all-together-the-poles-say-yes-to-their-country-s-entry-into-the-european-union>

²⁰ *Foreign Policy Magazine*, "Would Jesus join the EU?", https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/olj/fp/fp_mayjune03p.html

wrote an article for Poland's largest daily, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, poignantly titled "Thanks to agreements with the Church, we were able to join the European Union. If today women can go abroad to have an abortion, it is because of this."²¹ The title and opinion voiced in the article generated large discontent among women's rights activists who at the time were still fighting against the restrictive abortion legislation that Poland introduced under Law and Justice's rule.

Despite the open conflict that the Law and Justice government was in with European institutions and which negatively affected Poland's relations with the EU from 2015 until 2023, public support for Poland's membership in the community has remained very high until today. It has been evidenced by subsequent opinion polls, including the 2023 survey carried out by the European Parliament. This survey showed that three-fourths of Poles believe in the importance of their country's membership in the EU and as many as 82% think that Poland has gained a lot as a result of EU membership.²² The results of this survey do not differ much from other opinion polls carried out in Poland by Polish institutions. Overall, the high social support towards the EU is explained by benefits associated with EU membership, such as improved quality of life and new employment opportunities. Poles also seem to recognize the EU's contribution to maintaining peace and strengthening security in Europe. The value of the latter is especially appreciated since Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine. However, in regard to security provision, higher esteem is, expectedly, given to NATO than the EU.

²¹ Andrzej Brzeziecki, "Dzięki układom z Kościołem mogliśmy wejść do Unii. Jeśli dziś kobiety mogą wyjechać za granicę, by dokonać aborcji, to dzięki temu" <https://wyborcza.pl/magazyn/7,124059,29528491,srodowiska-kobiecie-maja-pretensje-ze-ojcowie-zalozyciele.html>

²² EU Parliament, Press release, December 2023, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/pl/press-room/20231204IPR15637/badanie-pokazuje-ze-europejczycy-cenia-czlonkostwo-w-uem>

The pro-integration opinions derived from the experience of life before and after the accession are most characteristic for older and middle-aged generations. Today, young adults are the group of citizens with the highest number of opponents to

Poland's membership in the European Union.²³ This trend has also been evidenced in numerous opinion polls and sociological research which point to a higher than average support of xenophobic behaviour within this age group of respondents.²⁴ This negative trend is a subject of discussion in Polish public debate but also something that the far-right forces and, under their pressure, more moderate conservative and centrist parties, take into consideration when running their political activities.

While many researchers and observers express their concern regarding future EU support among this social group, we can find also different interpretations.²⁵ In their view, the results of opinion polls do not necessarily indicate that anti-EU views will persist among this group of respondents and are rather a reflection of this generation's so-called formative years coinciding with the time when the Law and Justice was in power. During this period, much of the European content was removed from school textbooks and European institutions were portrayed as antagonistic to Poland and harmful to its sovereignty, especially by government-friendly public media.

Today, young adults are the group of citizens with the highest number of opponents to Poland's membership in the European Union.

²³ Polska Agencja Prasowa, *Co Polacy sądzą o członkostwie w Unii Europejskiej? Najnowsze badanie*, 29.05.2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/co-polacy-sadza-o-czlonkostwie-w-unii-europejskiej-najnowsze-badanie>

²⁴ Instytut Spraw Publicznych, 2017, "Młodzi Polacy a otaczający świat. Źródła informacji i doświadczenia w kontaktach zewnętrznych".

²⁵ Kamil Śmiałkowski, "Czemu tak wielu młodych jest przeciw UE? Tutaj nie ma cudów", TOK FM PL, 30 May 2024, <https://www.tokfm.pl/Tokfm/7,103085,31017178,czemu-tak-wielu-mlodych-jest-przeciw-ue-tutaj-nie-ma-cudow.html>

Recognizing the need to improve the attitude towards the EU among youngsters, Jerzy Buzek, Poland's Prime Minister from 1997 to 2001 and former President of the European Parliament, pointed to the need to continually build public awareness about the benefits of Poland's membership in the EU.²⁶ In this way, Buzek expressed a belief of the liberal elite that the economic gains that Poland has experienced since 2004 are the source of pride of the Polish society. They yet need to be better communicated to the younger generation. As a strong believer in the EU project, seeing this community as the best guarantee of stability for its members, Buzek also articulated his view that the responsibility for maintaining EU's cohesion now falls on the Polish political elite and society: "The EU today is the answer to the significant threats facing Europeans, and the Polish presidency in 2025 will shape the Union's actions for years to come. Therefore, it is crucial that the political class and society as a whole prepare thoroughly for this task."²⁷

A similar reflection, yet with a bit more concern was expressed by Marek Prawda, Poland's current Deputy Foreign Minister and former member of Team Europe Direct.²⁸ Representing the current government, Prawda stated that Poles are currently one of the most Euro-enthusiastic societies in the EU, advocating for further expansion of the Community to the East. However, keeping a realistic approach, Prawda added: "I see the danger in attempts by some groups aimed at discouraging Poles from their support towards the Community. This is a very risky game, as similar, unbelievable theories and myths were at the root of Brexit."²⁹

²⁶ Polska Agencja Prasowa, *Konferencja "20 lat Polski w UE": za nami olbrzymie przemiany, przed nami poważne wyzwania*, 17 April 2024, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/konferencja-20-lat-polski-w-ue-za-nami-olbrzymie-przemiany-przed-nami-powazne-wyzwania>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Team Europe Direct Poland, <https://teameurope.pl/>

²⁹ PAP MediaRoom, "20 lat Polski w UE: świętowanie sukcesów i fundamentalne pytania o przyszłość", 18 April 2024, <https://pap-mediroom.pl/polityka-i-spoleczenstwo/20-lat-polski-w-ue-swietowanie-sukcesow-i-fundamentalne-pytania-o>

Conclusions

It is difficult to imagine what Poland would look like today, had it not been a member of the European Union. A comparison with neighbouring Ukraine is often made in discussions on the economic development that has taken place in Poland since 2004. This visible progress which took place not only in Poland's economic sphere but also brought improvement in its social indicators, including higher indices in the rankings of higher education and longevity. These unquestionable benefits, enjoyed now by the majority of the Polish society and recognized also as a result of the application of *acquis communautaire*, are taken for granted by the young generation that did not experience life prior to the accession. Unfortunately, it is the representatives of this generation that show the least appreciation for the values that the European project stands for and are the most willing to question the benefits of shared European space. Most importantly, they also more willingly turn towards xenophobic rhetoric and remain susceptible to populist promises which in their view better address the national interests of Polish society.

Given this generational change and the political forces that are gaining popularity throughout Europe, as well as the instability coming from the actions of the Russian Federation, it is clear that in order to maintain and further develop the achievements resulting from the EU membership, it is not enough to maintain proper relations with European institutions and from time to time proclaim the gains that Poland has achieved from being a member of the EU. Today, more than ever before, the Polish political elite, but also its educators and media representatives, need to take more seriously the threat of rhetoric questioning the EU and Poland's membership. While the overall support towards the EU outweighed the scepticism in the past, the same victory cannot be guaranteed in

the future. It needs to be articulated more openly that to continue enjoying the benefits from the EU, Poles need to not only support their membership in the community but also strengthen it and consciously protect it. To achieve that, the pro-EU rhetoric needs to go beyond economic gains. It needs to be more values-based and as such presented to the general public. Only then, will the society understand the true value of what it has gained through EU membership.