

The September summit in Bratislava was only one stage of the discussion about the EU's future in the face of Brexit, which constitutes the most spectacular display of disintegration in Europe until now. The summit did not produce any fundamental decisions but only charted the directions in which changes will move. Among other things, these changes will involve enhancing cooperation in the field of internal security and combating terrorism, strengthening the EU's external borders, counteracting the influx of immigrants into Europe, and developing the EU's defence policy, along with a pledge to undertake actions aimed at stimulating economic growth. It is difficult to say whether at the end of the entire process these changes will be cosmetic or whether they will increase co-dependence between member states and lead to a further transfer of authority to the EU level. Even so, there is no doubt that all of these changes have one thing in common — they deepen European integration.

Tactical Value

Meanwhile, the main decision makers within the ruling camp in Poland are calling for a fundamental change of integration processes aimed at revising treaties, restricting the authority of EU institutions, and restoring sovereign powers to nation states. This is a strategic proposal that clearly diverges from the directions adopted in Bratislava.

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The advantage of the Polish proposal is that it aptly senses the climate following the British referendum. In many EU countries a growing portion of the public holds a reluctant attitude towards progressing integration. As German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier recently put it, the EU does not have the public's consent for further integration at present. Prior to the summit in Bratislava, [European Council President] Donald Tusk also presented the opinion that handing more power over to EU institutions was not the best cure for the EU's problems right now. According to the European Council president, voters in member states would like to have greater influence over EU decisions, which suggests the need to increase the role of national institutions in EU politics or hand some of Brussels' power over to member states.

Even so, Poland's proposal, despite being largely supported by the countries of the Visegrad Group, has no chance of being implemented right now. The majority of countries do not want to change the EU's treaties because they believe that this would „blow the EU to

pieces” in the current situation. Angela Merkel and other Western European leaders are instead aiming to deepen integration. Berlin would like to see progress made in various sectoral policies while other capitals are suggesting that the euro zone be strengthened or that integration be accelerated among a group of a dozen or so countries.

Voters’ Criticism

Poland’s European strategy has tactical value, even though it cannot hope to be implemented for the time being. As it appears, Central Europe’s voice was heard at the summit in Bratislava. This caused the controversial matter of re-allocating refugees to be set aside and simultaneously focused attention on what Central European leaders (including Donald Tusk) have been drawing attention to for a long time, namely the need to strengthen the EU’s external borders and undertake more intensive efforts aimed at halting the inflow of immigrants even before they reach the EU’s borders.

One should keep in mind that the discussion about the future of integration will last at least a dozen or so months and may change diametrically, especially as a result of a few elections that are scheduled to take place in 2017 — most importantly, in France and Germany. It is possible that voters’ growing criticism of progressing integration may cause an increasing number of countries to move closer to the position that is currently espoused by Polish politicians.

It is for this reason that the French campaign ahead of the presidential election is interesting. Nicolas Sarkozy, currently the most likely candidate for the position, would like to amend European treaties and restore member states’ control over the Schengen zone. Alain Juppe — Sarkozy’s most serious intra-party rival within The Republicans party — is in favour of limiting some of Brussels’ authority.

In turn, in Germany, the pressure exerted by the eurosceptic Alternative for Germany party is growing from election to election and even if the party does not take power it will certainly have a strong influence on the policies of the Bundestag and the future federal government. Aside from this, forces averse to integration may come to power in the Netherlands, Austria, and perhaps in Italy. The paradox of the current situation is that it was not until Great Britain decided to leave the EU that this launched a discussion in Europe about changes that the British themselves had been unsuccessfully promoting for years. Would this type of discussion, or even the implementation of treaty changes that move in this direction, be able to convince the British elites to withdraw from Brexit? This is not out of the question but it is probably highly unlikely.

A change on the European political stage after the 2017 elections might therefore facilitate the realization of Poland's proposals, although it does not guarantee success. The chief reason for this is that amending the treaties would open up Pandora's Box — namely it would signify tedious negotiations, which, for smaller countries, would not only provide an opportunity but would also pose a certain danger that the final result may be too far removed from said countries' initial expectations. It is worth recalling that the last negotiations of this sort that were conducted by Lech and Jaroslaw Kaczynski in 2007 ended in a fiasco with respect to the most important matter of the voting system [within the Council of the European Union]. On top of this, there is a chance that integration processes might be further destabilized, especially in a situation in which the ratification of treaties would, for instance, involve even just a few referendums.

Poland's ideas are aimed at strengthening the intergovernmental level and, because of this, they have an additional drawback. This is a method that chiefly rewards the EU's largest countries and — as recent history has shown — Western Europe or just the euro zone alone could easily outvote the countries of Central Europe. Strengthening the intergovernmental administration method within the EU will therefore not resolve the problems of the weaker countries in our region, unless they gain allies in other parts of the EU or bring about a revision of the voting system. From today's perspective, the latter possibility appears exceedingly difficult to achieve.

There is also a possibility that, even if certain powers were handed over to nation states, the reforms would simultaneously continue to deepen integration in other areas in the directions that were outlined in Bratislava. Under such circumstances, would Poland's proposals for fundamental reform become more tactical — meaning that they would be aimed at negotiating the most favourable terms for our country for deepening integration in various areas — or would they retain their strategic character?

In the latter case, logic would compel us to distance ourselves from further progress in integration, especially in those areas that the government sees as unfavourable to Poland's interests. In practice, this might mean looking for ways to exclude ourselves from certain EU policies.

This type of strategy carries a serious risk of instigating the British scenario. For years, British politicians undertook the aforementioned actions, which, as it turned out, resulted in a gradual withdrawal from the EU. The British example is also important because — as it seems — the country's elites did not have the strategic imagination regarding how to shape their politics after leaving the EU.

Alternative Scenarios

In Poland's case, these same ideas might gain the acceptance of those governments — chiefly the Italian and French governments — that seek to strengthen Europe's „core.” However, in this way, Poland would lose the ability to continue to hinder progress in integration exclusively within the European centre. Having the government distance itself from integration might also meet with incomprehension among Poles, who, in contrast to the British, are currently much more pro-European. Nevertheless, it must be admitted that, at the same time, most of society neither wants to integrate with the euro zone nor pursue any integration that might signify an influx of culturally foreign immigrants into the country. Support for integration in Poland is therefore not clear-cut, and it also changes under the influence of European crises.

To conclude — what is more important than high-sounding declarations is the question of what strategy Poland has in European politics. Operating on the EU stage currently requires detailed knowledge about EU policies and their possible changes. What is more, it would be advisable to carefully monitor the course of successive election campaigns in Europe, and especially the proposals made by leading politicians regarding future changes within the EU.

What is needed, however, is a strategy that provides alternative scenarios of action. And if the declarations made by politicians from the ruling camp have a strategic dimension to them, instead of being just a tactical game, then one cannot exclude scenarios that entail excluding ourselves from certain integration processes (along with all the possible consequences of doing so), especially since integration and disintegration processes in Europe are occurring very dynamically.

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