

Poland's bugging scandal highlights the need for a more pragmatic Polish foreign policy over Ukraine and Russia

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Leaked recordings of conversations involving government ministers and state officials have created intense controversy in Poland. Krzysztof Śliwiński writes that while at the domestic level the scandal has put the government under significant pressure, perhaps the most important implications are for Polish foreign affairs. He argues that the negative comments on relations between Poland and the United States made by Radosław Sikorski, the Polish Mister of Foreign Affairs, raise questions about the orientation of the country's foreign policy, suggesting that a more pragmatic approach should be adopted in dealing with the country's EU partners and Russia.



“Laws, like sausages, cease to inspire respect in proportion as we know how they are made”. This line, allegedly employed by an American poet, John Godfrey Saxe, and misattributed to accomplished political thinker and practitioner, First Chancellor of Germany, Otto Von Bismarck, proves relevant as always.

In recent days, Polish politics has been hit with revelations of this kind. Leaked recordings have shown major political figures appearing to strike shady deals ‘behind the curtains’. One of these cases involves Radosław Sikorski, the Polish Mister of Foreign Affairs, agreeing to help former deputy prime minister Jacek Rostowski in his endeavours to become a Member of the European Parliament in return for tentative support in Sikorski’s bid to become EU commissioner for Energy. Another example sees the same politician expressing his shockingly ‘realistic’ views concerning the Polish-American relationship. Sikorski has been quoted as saying: “The Polish-American alliance is worthless, even harmful, as it gives Poland a false sense of security. It’s bullshit.”

The ‘tapping scandal’ evoked criticism from opposition party [Law and Justice](#), whose leader, Jarosław Kaczyński, swiftly demanded a confidence vote in parliament. The Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, had to defend himself and his government publicly and has faced immense pressure from the media. While Poland’s internal security agency started an investigation into the matter, the government survived the confidence vote by a margin of 30 votes.

The tapping scandal and Polish-American relations

On a purely political level, there is nothing particularly new about this affair that would distinguish it from other political events. In fact, this is ‘business as usual’. This is how politics is made in many countries regardless of the specific provisions of their political systems: politics, in this respect, being much like laws and sausages.

Yet Sikorski’s words do raise interesting points as regards Polish foreign policy. Most importantly, it proves that policy makers in Warsaw are largely realistic about the value of [Polish-American strategic cooperation](#) that was proclaimed back in 2008. This co-operation certainly looks nice on paper and serves its purpose in both foreign and domestic political environments. Fundamentally, however, it is limited in terms of its contents, which renders it somewhat problematic.

Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been a deep consensus, shared by political elites and society at large, concerning the so-called ‘return to Europe’. Membership of the European Community and NATO were – and to this day remain – seen as vital symbols of economic prosperity, democratic success and security. On top of that, the United States has upheld Poles during many periods of their difficult history.

Particularly important was American support for Polish transformation in both political and economic terms after the end of the Cold War. Consequently, Poland has looked to America for security and the European Union for economic development. American engagement was again decisive in the case of NATO enlargement to the East. It is not

surprising that the presence of any elements of the US designed [Anti-Missile Defense system](#) are seen as boosting the country's political profile and its real military potential at considerably low cost.

Many fear that American commitment to Polish security is mostly declaratory in nature, given the geographical distance and current condition of the American economy. In this respect, the latest [pledge](#) by Barack Obama of \$1 Billion to improve the defence of Central Eastern European members of NATO is a nice gesture of good will, but that is all it really is – a nice gesture. The reality, however, is marked by striking asymmetry where Poland commits troops and money (Afghanistan and Iraq) being reciprocated by nice gestures and confirmation of endless support and commitment. Admittedly, it does create a sense of false security. Therefore one identifies a need to re-conceptualise Polish foreign policy and its defence strategy – a need to become more pragmatic, rational and strategic.



Radek Sikorski, Credit: Piotr Drabik (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

Most importantly, as Radek Sikorski seems to recognise, there is an objective necessity and material capacity for Poland to shift its foreign policy orientation from the US toward Europe, particularly in light of the fact that for some time Washington's attention has been paid elsewhere. Poland is geographically, politically and culturally located in Central Europe. Its current biggest challenge is its relationship with Russia. It is in fact difficult for many in Warsaw to accept the simple truth that as long as Poland stays fixated on close, military cooperation with the Americans, Russia continues to see such posture as a direct challenge to its security. As such, it remains one of the major obstacles on the road to Polish-Russian reconciliation, which has not been achieved despite continuous efforts since the early 1990s.

Impact on Poland's role in the EU

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of all is the identity of the mastermind(s) behind the 'tapping affair'. Those in the more 'Russophobic' camps have been quick to point out that Russia would be an obvious beneficiary. First and foremost, the 'tapping scandal' has undermined Polish negotiating positions in Brussels. Apart from obvious questions regarding the stability of the government or even the rule of law, the chances of getting top jobs in the EU for Radek Sikorski or Donald Tusk now seem to have diminished, although it is questionable how serious those chances were before the scandal.

Second, some of the projects that Poland has been trying to promote among its European partners, such as Energy Union or a common policy on Ukraine, are likely to suffer further. The truth of the matter is that Poland's hardline stance on Russia, alongside its staunch support for Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2005 and the Euromaidan in 2013-14, have been greeted by many politicians in Brussels, Berlin, Rome and even London with considerable unease.

This last point seems to be especially relevant with regard to the [Eastern Partnership](#). Poland was instrumental in shaping this initiative, which was directed toward Ukraine, among other post-Soviet states in the region, with the aim of providing closer links and preparing some countries for formal partnership with the EU. The Eastern Partnership nevertheless indirectly added to the pool of tensions that culminated in the Ukraine crisis and turned out to be a serious obstacle for the Kremlin in its attempts to rebuild the Russian sphere of influence. As such, however, from the Polish point of view it has proved a successful initiative as it has allowed the whole of the EU, in a broadly pragmatic fashion, to engage with those post-Soviet countries in its vicinity which have strategic relevance.

Given the above, Poland needs to become even more pragmatic in its dealings with major players in European Politics. That means recognising Russia for what it is – a non-democratic regime that challenges the international order in its neighbourhood, and whose economic and political interests reach far to the West. It is cooperation with other members of the EU, not the US, which holds the key to strengthening the position of Poland in Europe.

Only a pragmatic position will persuade western political leaders that Poland is not an emotional ‘trouble-maker’ when it comes to Russia, but rather a constructive and important partner. It is a challenge that will require striking a delicate balance, but it should nevertheless be possible so long as politics is recognised in Warsaw for what it is – the art of protecting interests and a useful tool for the reconciliation of conflicts even if, like sausages, we may not enjoy the process of creation.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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