

Parliamentary Dimension of the Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union

The Polish Presidency of the Council of the European Union began with a ceremonial sitting of the Sejm and Senate attended by President Bronisław Komorowski, Marshal of the Sejm Grzegorz Schetyna, Marshal of the Senate Bogdan Borusewicz, Prime Minister Donald Tusk and members of the government. On July 1st, 2011, European Union and Polish anthems were played in the session hall of the Polish parliament.

Marshal of the Sejm Grzegorz Schetyna stressed the importance of that day for Poland and the Poles: “Today, we are presiding over the united Europe. We are standing tall and proud to represent the entire continent, where human rights are the source of power, while decisions on the future of our community arise from parliamentary approval”. The Marshal of the Sejm pointed out that during the Polish Presidency the Polish Sejm and Senate would take over the responsibility for cooperation of all national parliaments within the European Union. President Bronisław Komorowski stated that the opening Polish Presidency of the EU Council was “the realization of dreams that many generations have had about joining the Western world permanently”. In his opinion, both the membership of the EU and the Polish Presidency should make Poles proud. The Marshal of the Senate Bogdan Borusewicz emphasised in his speech that Poland would be the “EU flagship” for the following six months and it would be our competence, knowledge, efficiency and diplomatic skills that would decide whether we would be able to stand up to the occasion and prove effective in solving the problems faced by Europe.

During the six-month Polish Presidency, the Polish parliament initiated and maintained interparliamentary cooperation, which involved such tasks as presiding over the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC), organising sectoral committee meetings, conferences, seminars, and co-organising parliamentary meetings in Brussels with the European Parliament. Elementary and high school students and their parents were not forgotten, with a number of dedicated events addressed to them, e.g. an open day in the Sejm or the exhibition on the tradition of Polish parliamentarism. Among the attractions available during the open day, the visitors could visit the session hall or the column hall as well as view the original copies of Poland’s EU Accession Treaty and the Lisbon Treaty. The Sejm also organized weekend summer screenings for fans of European cinema. Those interested in the substance of the parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency could view all the ongoing meetings and conferences at the dedicated www.parl2011.pl website, featuring e.g. press releases and photographs.

Challenges and threats faced by EU-NATO relations

The series of meetings under the parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency was initiated by the conference of the Chairpersons of Defence Affairs Committees of EU Member States (CODACC) entitled: “EU – NATO after Lisbon – a new concept of challenges and threats”. During the two-day meeting (3-5.07.2011), the participants decided that it was important to initiate a discussion on revising the EU security strategy and to endeavour to make the cooperation with NATO more effective.

Minister of National Defence Bogdan Klich listed such priorities of the Polish Presidency as acting towards ensuring better security in Europe and improving its defence capabilities. “That is why Poland wants to focus on such issues as improvement of Battlegroups usability, improvement of EU military planning structures and strengthening EU – NATO relations”, he said. According to President Bronisław Komorowski, the meeting was a great opportunity to

stress the importance Poland attached to security and defence issues *sensu largo*. He also pointed to the EU's shortcomings and weaknesses in terms of security and defence, which had become apparent during the so-called "Arab Spring" in North Africa and the Middle East.

Other topics discussed during the conference included the role of Russia in building European security. Former head of Polish diplomacy Adam Rotfeld stressed that the prevalent view in both the EU and Russia was that both sides needed each other. "The new formula is not so much about mutual deterrents as co-dependency and shaping a common security area", he claimed. The chairman of the Council of the Federation Committee on Defence and Security Victor Ozerov spoke on behalf of the Russian side: "We are all at the stage when there is both a possibility and faith in that we may move from a balance of powers to a balance of interests, from global opposition in the military and other spheres to multi-dimensional cooperation".

One of the topics of the two-day meeting of the delegation of the Sejm and Senate to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly (25-26.09.2011) was the role of the North Atlantic Alliance in combating contemporary threats.

According to the NATO Assistant Secretary General for Emerging Security Challenges Gábor Iklódy, if the transatlantic community wanted to ensure security, it would have to change its approach in that respect. Gábor Iklódy pointed to the importance of solidarity, which directly affected the success and effectiveness of any actions to be undertaken. Vice-President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly and Head of the Sejm and Senate Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Jadwiga Zakrzewska stressed the importance of common actions undertaken in the spirit of solidarity in the face of new threats to European security. "Solidarity is first and foremost a responsibility. In Poland, we are aware of this". In her opinion, the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy would take a new dimension as a result of close cooperation between NATO and the Community. On the other hand, President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Karl A. Lamers admitted that despite the death of Osama bin Laden, international terrorism remained a serious threat. "That is why EU-NATO cooperation in combating threats, including sharing information, is so important," he said.

Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs Jacek Najder expressed his conviction that North America and Europe would not be able to cope with new challenges on their own. He referred to such threats of the 21st century as terrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction or cyber-terrorism. He also pointed to such problems arising from globalized social and economic situation as mass migration, natural environment degradation, food insufficiency or arms trade. "The Alliance must remain flexible and be able to make fast decisions," he said. On the other hand, Minister of National Defence Tomasz Siemoniak stressed the importance of dialogue during military operations conducted as part of the Common Security and Defence Policy, e.g. EUNAVFOR Atalanta Operation in Somalia or EUTM in Uganda.

COSAC: The principle of solidarity indispensable in negotiating the multiannual budget perspective for 2014-2020

One of the most important events of the parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency was the Conference of Parliamentary Committees for Union Affairs of Parliaments of the European Union (COSAC) held in early October (2-4.10.2011). The participants of that two-day meeting supported the efforts of the EU institutions, which had developed assumptions for the multiannual financial framework for 2014-2020 and encouraged the negotiators to produce a budget providing for full implementation of medium- and long-term EU policies, in line with the European principle of solidarity and in consideration of the economic and financial crisis. They deemed comprehensive social consultations one of the necessary

measures to improve the planning and implementation of the EU budget. The conference conclusions emphasised that the cohesion policy together with just and equal common agricultural policy were critical to strengthening solidarity within the Union and to reduce economic as well as social discrepancies among Member States. It was also stressed that rules and procedures for gathering, allocating and utilising the EU's own resources needed to be simplified and made more transparent.

The conference participants expressed their satisfaction with the active participation of national parliaments in the process of scrutinising legislative acts in line with the subsidiarity principle (such power was vested in the parliaments in the Lisbon Treaty). The participants positively evaluated the cooperation of national parliaments with the European Commission. They also requested that the Commission provide more detailed and concrete answers to justified opinions on EU bills.

During the plenary sessions, Vice-president of the European Commission for inter-institutional relations and administration Maroš Šefčovič asked the national parliament representatives not to limit themselves to Commission monitoring only, but to be more involved and cooperate closely in shaping the EU vision. In his opinion, political dialogue should not be based on written exchange of positions only.

EU Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budget Janusz Lewandowski spoke about the budget negotiated for 2014-2020. He stressed that the main assumption of the new budget development process was "more European policy for the same money". He listed the common agricultural policy and cohesion policy among the main spending areas, but stressed that the allocation of funds within those areas should be changed in favour of other areas that lacked financing, such as the common neighbourhood policy. Minister for European Affairs Mikołaj Dowgielewicz in turn presented the meeting participants with a progress report on the implementation of Polish Presidency priorities. "The greatest achievement of the Polish Presidency is that we are able to reach a compromise even in the most difficult economic strategy issues," said the Minister. Among the achievements of the Polish Presidency of the EU Council, he mentioned the compromise reached on the so-called "six-pack", which, in his opinion, negated the opinions that the cooperation among individual EU institutions was ineffective.

COSAC was preceded by the meeting of the Chairs of parliamentary European Affairs Committees of Member States and representatives of candidate countries held in early July (10-11.07.2011). Its objective was to prepare the October meeting. The meeting participants discussed such issues as the Schengen zone or migration caused by developments in North Africa.

Cohesion policy as the answer to EU development challenges

The future of the cohesion policy was discussed by the Chairs of Economic, Regional Policy and Infrastructure Committees in the Polish parliament on 17th and 18th July.

Sejm Marshal Grzegorz Schetyna opened the conference, stressing in his speech that the cohesion policy directly affected the increased living standard of EU citizens and the creation of new jobs. Minister of Regional Development Elżbieta Bieńkowska spoke in a similar vein, saying that "the cohesion policy is an effective, efficient and territorially diversified response to the EU development challenges". In her opinion, cohesion policy was beneficial not only to the funds' recipients, but also for the entire Union. Chair of the Committee on Regional Development of the European Parliament Danuta Hübner stressed that the cohesion policy

should be a key element of the budget being negotiated for 2014-2020. She added that it was important to maintain the strategic nature of the cohesion policy. Chair of the Sejm Economic Committee Wojciech Jasiński pointed out that the cohesion policy should ensure internal cohesion within the EU, while the objective of the “Europe 2020” strategy should be a high level of economic growth.

Minister of Infrastructure Cezary Grabarczyk said that one could not imagine integration without a good transportation network. “That is why the Polish Presidency is determined to treat the revision of the Trans-European Transport Networks as one of its priorities,” he stressed. In his opinion, one of the challenges faced by contemporary Europe was to fully implement the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) in its entirety.

Impact of the economic and financial crisis on the future of the single market

At the meeting of the Chairs of Economic Committees (24-25.07.2011), Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy Waldemar Pawlak spoke about the need to strengthen the European internal market in order to overcome the financial crisis and boost economic growth. As he noted, the regulations implemented by the EU should be viewed mostly in terms of their impact on the competitiveness of the European economy. He also spoke about the Polish actions aimed at strengthening the single market, such as the eradication of barriers preventing on-line transborder transactions and creating a single European patent.

A similar opinion was voiced by former EU Commissioner for Internal Market and Services, economist Mario Monti, who stated that decisive measures for the development of the single market should be undertaken in order to stop the crisis and prevent it from re-occurring in the future. In his opinion, a consolidated EU market was also needed in the light of re-emerging nationalisms. “In many countries we can see the return of small parties, left-wing and right-wing alike, which are growing and which have one thing in common: rejection of European and global integration,” he said. That was why, in his opinion, Member States had to undertake bold actions to protect the single market, before it would be destroyed by such forces. On the other hand, according to Senator Jan Wyrowiński, the critical elements in the process of single market development included the implementation of the services directive, finalization of the integrated transport and power infrastructure.

Support for democratic processes in EU neighbourhood as a prerequisite for stability

In early September (4-6.09.2011), the Chairs of Foreign Affairs Committees of EU Member States (COFACC) as well as the invited guests discussed the issue of the EU’s obligations towards its neighbours, in particular towards the Eastern Partnership countries. Developing the Eastern Partnership initiated by Poland and Sweden was one of the priorities of the Polish Presidency. The participants stressed the need for the Member States to support democratic processes both in the eastern and southern neighbour states. “The role of the EU is to support its neighbours, and Europe will benefit from the policy of openness and good relations with Eastern Europe and North Africa. As the developments have shown, we must support democratic structures, sustainable economic growth, creation of new jobs and development of trade,” stated Deputy Head of Polish diplomacy Jan Borkowski. Marshal of the Sejm Grzegorz Schetyna stressed the fact that the stronger the democratic processes, the safer the EU borders. “Europe does not have to close its borders if behind those borders are partners who respect human rights”. The floor was also taken by a member of the Belarusian opposition, Alexander Milinkevich, who warned against imposing premature economic sanctions on Belarus, as it could have a destructive effect on the country’s economy.

EU energy security in crisis conditions

In mid-September (11-12.09.2011), the Chairs of parliamentary Economic Affairs Committees of EU Member States discussed the needs and possibilities for financing the EU's energy policy until 2020. The participants agreed that the prerequisite for implementing common European energy policy was securing considerable funding from the budget negotiated for 2014-2020, which would not be easy due to the financial crisis. EU Commissioner for Energy Guenther Oettinger argued that an energy strategy for the entire EU may be another great European project. However, in his opinion it required large investment projects, such as e.g. the construction of trans-European transmission networks, which would be difficult taking into account the public debt levels in certain Member States. He listed switching to renewable energy sources and limiting CO₂ emissions as some of the challenges awaiting Europe.

On the other hand, according to Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Economy Waldemar Pawlak CO₂ emissions could not be successfully limited without the involvement of such countries as China, India, USA or Brazil. In his opinion, setting too high reduction goals for Europe might lower the competitiveness of EU economies. He added that the EU's energy policy should meet three objectives: competitiveness, sustainable development and security of supply.

Solidarity in action improves stability

Lessons learned from the financial crisis and challenges connected with European economic governance: these were the topics of the Conference of Chairpersons of Finance Committees of EU Member States (18-19.09.2011). Conference participants highlighted the importance of solidarity of the entire EU in preventing crises. Chair of the Sejm Public Finance Committee Paweł Arndt spoke about the need to coordinate economic policies, planning and financial supervision. In his opinion, it was important to create mechanisms which would determine the objectives and rules of economic governance on the one hand, and ensure the enforcement of adopted rules, on the other.

Minister of Finance Jacek Rostowski praised the Polish Presidency for its efforts to adopt the so-called six-pack, i.e. a package of six legal acts strengthening the EU's budget discipline. "This is a great success, we are proud of it", he said. The minister also underlined the importance of structural reforms which could lead to reducing the tax burden or improving the stability of public finance, among others. "Creating the European response and financial supervision system, the six-pack (...) go in the right direction in safeguarding Europe against crisis", he argued. Chair of the Polish Financial Supervision Authority Stanisław Kluza spoke about the role of financial institutions in times of crisis. In his opinion, one of the most important issues that needed further efforts was the creation of equal and competitive rules of the game for different financial institutions.

The EU divided over Common Agricultural Policy reform

European politicians also discussed the Common Agricultural Policy, which was one of the priorities of the Polish Presidency. The two-day meeting (25-26.09.2011) revealed diverging views on the reform of direct subsidies for farmers in the EU.

Minister of Agriculture Marek Sawicki stated that the EU's Common Agricultural Policy currently in place was unjust and blocked development. In his opinion, the direct subsidies regime which awarded subsidies per hectare of cropped area based on the farmer's country of

origin, rather than his production conditions disrupted the uniform single market. He argued that the reformed agricultural policy should aim to improve competitiveness on the international market. Chair of the Senate Agriculture and Rural Development Committee Jerzy Chróścikowski spoke in a similar vein. From his point of view, the current differentiation, based first and foremost on historical criteria, was incompliant with CAP objectives and often posed a threat to the competitiveness and cohesion of the single agricultural market. In order to prevent the differentiation of financial support for farmers from individual Member States, it was necessary to adopt an appropriate budget and introduce a new fund allocation regime, he argued.

On the other hand, parliamentarians from countries receiving larger subsidies than Poland, were in favour of upholding current rules or reforming CAP, but over a number of years. According to Mr Andrew Doyle, a Deputy from Ireland, when standardizing direct subsidies one should bear in mind that production cost varied in individual Member States. Belgian Deputy Karlos Callens stressed in turn that moving from the referential system to objective criteria would need a lengthy transition period.

Challenges for the single market

In mid-October (10-11.10.2011), at the European Parliament, European politicians discussed the future of the single market and analysed the progress of re-introducing the single market in areas such as: citizens' mobility, consumer protection or the single digital market.

EU Commissioner for Internal Market and Services Michel Barnier stated that one of the EU's most important tasks was increasing the European services market and production output, so that Europe would not become a subcontractor for the Chinese or American economy. As he said, it was important to enter into dialogue with citizens and undertake joint actions to eliminate risks on the internal market. The Commissioner also expressed his recognition of the Polish Presidency's efforts with respect to the single market.

Social cohesion and demographic development discussed in Brussels

The conference cycle organised under the parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency was concluded by the Joint Parliamentary Meeting in Brussels devoted to a debate on social cohesion and demographic growth; the meeting was attended by the Marshals of the Sejm and Senate, Ms Ewa Kopacz and Mr Bogdan Borusewicz, and the President of the European Parliament, Mr Jerzy Buzek.

Referring to social cohesion and demographic development, Sejm Marshal Ewa Kopacz underlined that the ongoing crisis required cooperation conducted in the spirit of solidarity. "If Europe is to fulfil the goals which have been set and return onto the path of sustainable development, we need to take a closer look at the ongoing changes in the European society". She indicated the ageing European society and excess burden placed on pension systems as real threats to the development of EU economy. Furthermore, she stressed matters such as maintaining a high level of employment, and combating poverty and social exclusion. This problem was also highlighted by Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion László Andor, who stated that poverty and lack of social equality in Europe may also pose a threat to social cohesion. The Commissioner announced that the priority of the European Commission for the upcoming year would be to protect people most exposed to the risk of unemployment and to eradicate social inequality.

President of the European Parliament Jerzy Buzek, expressed his opinion that the cohesion policy was a well-tried solution for combating poverty and ageing of the European society. He also underlined responsibility towards future generations, the importance of women's rights and actions aimed at increasing the role of motherhood.

Minister of Labour and Social Policy Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz highlighted the issue of supporting gender equality in professional life as well as the importance of changes implemented to facilitate the work-life balance.

The guest speaker of the Joint Parliamentary Meeting, Director of the Social Security Department at the International Labour Organisation, Mr Michael Cichon, presented an analysis of the current demographic situation in the EU and possible political actions aimed at improving productivity and reforming social welfare systems. According to Cichon, in order to maintain cohesion in societies and the current standard of living, Europeans would have to pay higher taxes, increase their work output and extend their working life as well as invest in health protection and education.

MEP Constanze Krehl presented the package of regulations containing proposals for the cohesion policy after 2013 and its relation to the "Europe 2020" strategy. She encouraged parliamentarians to urge the ministers of finance of their respective countries to support the implementation of the cohesion policy. In her opinion, supporting such actions would bring tangible benefits even in times of crisis.

During the debate held during the meeting, speakers stressed that the cohesion policy influenced economic growth and was a good answer to the EU's development challenges. They were unanimous about increasing retirement age and supporting professional activation of the elderly. They also highlighted the problem of financing the demographic policy, including the potential conflict between the objectives of national and EU policies. They underlined the importance of the social solidarity principle. The debate also included the proposed "motherhood" directive, the need to supplement the labour market with immigrants and actions aimed at increasing birth rate in the EU.

Support for democratic change in Africa

Apart from holding sectoral committee meetings, the Polish parliament organised conferences devoted to important matters regarding e.g. the functioning of the EU or problems of the modern world.

One of such conferences concerned African development cooperation strategies. Members of the Association of European Parliamentarians for Africa (AWEPA) debated on this matter on 27 July in Warsaw. Vice-Marshall of the Sejm Jerzy Wenderlich said that by getting involved in the development cooperation, Poland wished to express its solidarity with nations in need of support. AWEPA President, Ms Miet Smet, stressed the need to support African-European dialogue on development strategies. In her opinion, efficient management, transparency and accountability were the prerequisites for development, stability and ensuring peace and prosperity in Africa.

Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Krzysztof Stanowski, pointed to the fact that apart from development aid Africa needed support in building democratic systems. "The European Union, as a union of democratic states, should also support democracy in international relations", he argued. On the other hand, First Deputy Speaker of the Parliamentary Assembly of Angola, Mr Joao Manuel Goncalves Lourenco, pointed out the need to introduce peace

dialogue, reduce armed conflicts and improve the quality of life of African people. During the conference, it was also stated that strong political will and a correct selection of priorities were indispensable in order to achieve Millennium Development Goals.

Europe of the Carpathians

The Carpathian Convention protocol on tourism and forest areas in the Carpathian macro-region was signed during the “Europe of the Carpathians” Conference, held as part of the parliamentary dimension of the Polish EU Presidency at the 21st Economic Forum in Krynica-Zdrój (7-8.09.2011). The aim of the protocol is to ensure the sustainable management and protection of Carpathian forests.

The Carpathian Convention is a framework convention on the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathians, which Poland signed in 2006. The main aim of the document is comprehensive policy-making and cooperation for the protection and sustainable development of the Carpathian region with a view to improving quality of life, strengthening the economy and supporting local communities, taking advantage from natural riches and cultural heritage of the Carpathians.

Discussing national, ethnic and linguistic minorities in Lublin

One of the venues of the parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency was the city of Lublin, where the current situation of national, ethnic and linguistic minorities in the EU was discussed (14-16.09.2011) at a conference attended by representatives of minorities from EU Member States, scientists, parliamentarians, local government representatives and members of NGOs dealing with minority-related matters. According to the Sejm Marshal, Grzegorz Schetyna, Lublin was the best place to hold such a debate on account of its multicultural traditions. For centuries Lublin was inhabited by different communities, e.g. Jews, Ukrainians, Czechs, Russians, Scots, Italians and Belarusians, who lived there side by side with the Polish population. The capital of the Lublin region is the only Polish city chosen for the pilot phase of the Council of Europe and European Commission “Intercultural Cities” programme.

EU-Russia cooperation

The parliamentary dimension of the Polish Presidency also featured a two-day EU-Russia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee meeting (19-20.09.2011). Chair of the Sejm Foreign Affairs Committee, Mr Andrzej Halicki, expressed his hope that the meeting would have a positive and lasting effect on the relations between the European Parliament and the State Duma and Council of the Russian Federation. Deputy Head of Polish diplomacy Jerzy Pomianowski, also took the floor, saying that the present relations between Europe and Russia were based on the principle of cooperation. He argued that the EU wanted Russia to join the World Trade Association and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and spared no effort in order to ensure that the negotiations could be concluded this year. He also expressed his satisfaction at the Polish-Russian cooperation in various bilateral historical committees, which, in his opinion, “enable us to come closer to each other step by step and gather a better understanding of the past”.

Meeting participants also debated on the visa-free border crossing agreement between Poland and Kaliningrad Oblast. Governor of Kaliningrad Oblast Nikolay Tsukanov, argued that eliminating the visa obligation was important in that it would contribute to economic, tourist and scientific development of the whole region.