

Poland's New Ambitions

Two decades after Solidarity's triumph, Poland is leveraging its geography and aid dollars to pay forward the support its struggling democratic movement received from abroad.

BY ANDREW CURRY

IN 1980, A GROUP OF SHIPYARD WORKERS MADE a daring stand in the Polish city of Gdańsk, establishing an independent workers' union in a so-called workers' state run by a tiny elite. Fervor for the union spread rapidly. Within a year, more than 10 million Poles—80 percent of the work force—joined Solidarity or one of its branches. The trade union evolved into a political movement, using strikes and protests to force concessions—on freedom of speech, the right to strike, and the right to travel—from the country's communist regime. Poland became an island of unrest in the heart of the Soviet bloc. In December 1981, under heavy Soviet pressure, the Polish government, led by Wojciech Jaruzelski, declared a state of martial law. Soldiers and tanks claimed the streets, and thousands of Solidarity leaders were jailed. Strikes were brutally crushed by riot police, and the trade union was banned.

Janina Ochojska—then a 26-year-old astrophysicist at the Polish Academy of Sciences, in Toruń—was active in the Solidarity movement. She remembers lis-

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tening to the radio when martial law was imposed: "When friends were arrested, Radio Free Europe mentioned the names of these people and we felt secure. The world knew about the arrests. We felt that we are not alone." Over the next decade, support from abroad would take on an outsize importance in Poland. Sources as diverse as the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency and the Catholic Church covertly funded Solidarity's underground activities. Electrician-cum-Solidarity leader Lech Walesa received worldwide recognition when he was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize in 1983, though he didn't travel to Norway to accept it, fearing he would not be allowed back into Poland. Broadcasters including Radio Free Europe, Voice of America, and the BBC provided an alternative to state-controlled media.

Ochojska, who had suffered from polio as a child, traveled to France for medical treatment in 1984. There, she volunteered with French organizations putting together convoys of donated medicine and food bound for Poland. She returned in 1989 to a changed country. After months of negotiations between Solidarity leaders





Solidarity leader Lech Walesa addresses a crowd of workers during the 1980 shipyard strike in Gdańsk. Today, the spirit of Solidarity, which began as a local labor movement and inspired a national *cri de coeur* for freedom, informs Poland's democracy promotion efforts abroad.

and the communist regime, the trade union, now a full-fledged political party, had handily won the nation's first free elections in decades. But Poland faced a harsh reality. While the Solidarity movement had been a tour de force of self-help and organization, Poland's economy

was in tatters after a decade of repression and international sanctions. In 1990, the inflation rate was 686 percent.

Cities choked on pollution from huge, inefficient factories; the countryside, where fields were still plowed

with horses, was mired in poverty. Poland became a charity case. Between 1990 and 1994, it received nearly \$36 billion in aid, \$5.5 billion from the United States alone. The Marriott in downtown Warsaw was booked solid for years with experts from the United States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (derisively dubbed the “Marriott Brigades”). The “shock therapy” prescribed by Western economists, including Harvard’s Jeffrey Sachs, led to the shuttering or privatization of dozens of state companies.

Ochojska and other Poles refused to accept that their country was helpless, even in its weakened state. When war broke out in the Balkans in 1992, Ochojska recalls, “it was very hard to know near us was a terrible war, and

Poland did nothing. In this moment, Poles were ready to help but needed someone to tell them how.” That December, she organized an aid convoy to Sarajevo, just as she had seen French donors do to help her own country. A mention on Polish radio resulted in an outpouring of donations, enough to fill a dozen trucks. Over the next decade, Ochojska organized convoys to Serbia, Chechnya, and Kosovo; her ad hoc missions eventually turned into the Polish Humanitarian Organization (PAH), the country’s largest independent aid agency, with projects in dozens of countries.

As Poland’s economy righted itself, the number of activists and aid programs in the country grew. In morphing from protest movement to political party, Solidarity faltered. But its independent spirit and dedication to democracy remained a strong current in Polish politics. Postcommunist elections have gone to parties on the right and the left, but a commitment to engagement with Poland’s eastern neighbors and integration with Europe has been a constant. Though Polish zloty are spent on humanitarian projects such as Ochojska’s, the country has created an identity for itself by invoking the legacy of Solidarity in its approach to foreign aid. Poland is not the only country in Europe to fund democracy promotion, but it is the only one to explicitly place such efforts at the top of the government’s list of foreign assistance priorities.

Today, downtown Warsaw is a thicket of glass-and-steel skyscrapers, lit at night by neon signs and choked with traffic. Kiosks are jammed with hundreds of Polish magazines and newspapers, the products of a thriving media scene. Poland was the only country in the European Union not to suffer a recession last year; its economy, now the EU’s sixth largest, grew by two percent despite the global downturn. Unemployment is below 10 percent, comparable to Germany’s, and exports are close to \$200 billion.

A new identity is evident in Poland’s actions on the world stage. Led by activists such as Ochojska and by policymakers informed by Solidarity’s legacy and determined to make the country a regional player, Poland is transforming itself. Polish development assistance abroad grew from \$30 million in 2004 to \$372 million in 2008.



Radio Racja, an FM station that broadcasts independent news and entertainment into neighboring Belarus, is backed by the Polish government.

That's a lot for a country that ranks near the bottom of the EU in terms of per capita income and barely a decade ago was an aid recipient itself.

Most of the money Poland contributes is funneled through international organizations such as the EU and the United Nations. Only a fraction of the rest (\$83.8 million in 2008) goes to what most people would consider aid—tents for earthquake victims, food for starving children in Africa, or the clean water projects Ochojska promotes at PAH. Instead, Poland's priorities are influenced by its recent past, and its ambitions are essentially local. At the top of its aid list are a handful of countries in Russia's orbit, including

Belarus, Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. According to the Polish Foreign Ministry, promoting democracy and building civil society are the top priorities. "That's our political competence," says Marek Ziolkowski, director of development assistance. "It's key in our foreign policy to take care of our good neighborhood."

Polish funding has flowed to efforts such as local government reform in Ukraine, training for Georgian journalists, and satellite and radio broadcasts in Belarusian. Poles know that successful democracy movements need steady, sustained help. "There's a common understanding that we got a lot of Western help, especially during the '80s under martial law," says Agnieszka Romaszewska-Guzy, the director of Belsat, a Belarusian-language satellite TV channel run out of Warsaw that is Poland's latest and largest effort to undermine the Belarusian government's information monopoly. "It would be difficult to find people more convinced of the effectiveness of this kind of opportunity."

Poland may be the most assertive of all the new EU countries in using its foreign aid budget to influence its neighbors. Poles look east darkly, as only a country invaded by its eastern neighbor three times in one century can. Other new EU members have been content to go along with the EU consensus on relations with Russia, acknowl-

edging a Russian sphere of influence and overlooking Russia's authoritarian impulses in the interest of smooth economic relationships. In Warsaw, monuments to the victims of Soviet atrocities during World War II occupy prominent real estate in and around the Old Town. The idea of Poland as Europe's last frontier goes back centuries. "It's part of our national consciousness that we have two archetypes of our

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place in the world—as defenders of the West and as a bridge towards the East," says Adam Balcer, a political analyst at Warsaw-based think tank demoscEUROPA. "It means we sometimes perceive the world in black and white."

From "soft-power" democracy promotion efforts to outspoken diplomacy, Poland has pushed hard against Russian influence and emerged as a leading—and sometimes the only—proponent of expanding the EU east to Ukraine and even Georgia. During Ukraine's 2004–05 Orange Revolution, then–Polish president Aleksander Kwasniewski flew to Kyiv to mediate between the old regime and the winners of elections there. Days after Russian tanks entered Georgia in 2008, Polish president Lech Kaczynski traveled to Tbilisi to show his support for the Georgian government; when Russian hackers targeted the Georgian government's Web presence, Poland's foreign ministry hosted Georgia's official Web site on its servers. Polish diplomats in Brussels have pushed the EU to adopt a more hawkish position on Russia and other authoritarian regimes, and enthusiastically support extending EU membership to Ukraine.

Poland has suffered for its trouble. It has been shut out of lucrative energy and pipeline deals and endured Russian economic embargoes—not to mention dramatic threats after it signed a missile-defense

deal with the United States hours after Kaczynski's return from Georgia. (A top Russian general warned at the time that Poland was "exposing itself to a [nuclear] strike—100 percent.") President Barack Obama canceled that deal in September in favor of a ship-based plan he said would be more effective against Iran. The ill-timed announcement, made on the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, was received with dismay in Warsaw.

On a gray day last November I traveled to Białystok, a city in eastern Poland that is in effect an out-

1980s. Radio Racja—"Radio Reason" or "Radio Right"—whose studios and offices fill the second floor of a building on a Białystok side street, began broadcasting music and news over the border in March 2006. Unlike Radio Free Europe's shortwave broadcast, the FM station's 35-megawatt transmissions, from towers on the Polish side of the border, only penetrate about 75 miles into Belarus.

Station director Eugeniusz Wappa, 45, was active in the dissident movement when he was a history student at the University of Warsaw in the 1980s. He

believes that even in the age of Internet radio, FM makes a statement because it is accessible everywhere. "We're real radio, not virtual. You can listen in your home, in your car, at work, 24 hours a day," he says, pausing to turn up the set

TODAY, 90 PERCENT of Poles think their country is in a position to support development in other countries.

post on the edge of Europe, to see what the country's democracy promotion looks like in practice. Białystok is an industrial center of more than a quarter-million residents a few dozen miles from the border with Belarus, a country Kwasniewski calls "the last real dictatorship in Europe." Since Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko was elected in 1994, he has consolidated his power, pulled Belarus closer to Russia, and, according to Poles, discriminated against the country's large Polish minority.

Białystok is not a pretty place. In the last two decades it has embraced capitalism with a vengeance—the façades of downtown buildings are hidden behind colorful signs advertising the dozens of small businesses inside, and the streets around the train station are crowded with kiosks selling everything from cheap clothing to fruit. A huge distillery on the city's outskirts supplies premium vodka to markets as far-flung as the United States and Japan.

In 2006, in response to a government crackdown on democracy activists in Belarus, Poland opened a sort of "Radio Free Belarus" in Białystok. It was a symbolic gesture, a nod to the international broadcasts from the United States, West Germany, and the United Kingdom that sustained Solidarity in the

on his desk. In the hallway outside, the mint-green walls are lined with photos of the station's broadcasters in action—and a blown-up photo of helmeted Belarusian riot cops tackling a protester.

Belarusian rock bands, most of them banned back home, are in heavy rotation; news shows feature everything from reports on traffic jams along the border and strikes at Belarusian factories to interviews with Belarusian dissidents. According to Wappa, the station's correspondents in Minsk, Grodno, and Brest are harassed regularly by the authorities. One memorable early story was filed by cell phone from the back of a police van.

Despite the pre-Soviet Belarusian flag hanging on the wall in the station's conference room, the reporters trickling in to put together the afternoon news programs evinced little revolutionary passion or optimism that change would come to Belarus anytime soon. Sergiusz Skulaviec, a slight, soft-spoken Belarusian journalist who left the country in 2006 to escape constant harassment from Belarus's KGB, said any meaningful improvement is 15 or 20 years away. That didn't dampen his determination to provide Belarusians with an alternative to state-controlled media. "For me, that's a long time. For a country, not so



Thousands of Poles, including these young people waving a historic Belarusian flag, packed a central Warsaw square in March 2007 to show support for street protests in Minsk, Belarus, against the repressive regime of President Aleksander Lukashenko.

much,” he told me in accented Polish. “I don’t know about my future, but in the long term these little steps won’t be turned around.”

Even if Radio Racja broadcasts mostly mundane fare—music, sports, and traffic—it’s an important gesture for Poles, a way of paying forward the moral and diplomatic support Western Europe and the United States provided the country’s dissident movement in the 1980s. Today, Radio Racja is the Polish Foreign Ministry’s second-largest aid program, with almost \$400,000 in state funding. More money comes from the Dutch and British embassies, which help pay for the station’s Web site (www.racja.com).

When I visited, Radio Racja’s office was abuzz. Barely 24 hours earlier, the station had added a radio tower near Brest, extending its coverage to nearly the entire Belarusian-Polish border. “It’s a very emotional day for us,” Wappa said.

Poland came through the turbulence of the 1990s with flying colors. But the mentality nurtured by that era of dependency is only now beginning to turn around. Just five years ago, less than two-thirds of Poles thought Poland was in a position to support development in other countries. Today, that proportion has grown to nearly 90 percent. The change may have something to do with the way aid money is

spent. The Polish aid that doesn't flow through official EU channels is distributed to Polish nongovernmental organizations, from PAH to Radio Racja, which may be an inefficient process from an economist's point of view (the average grant is \$60,000) but makes it possible for ordinary people to get involved. "The main benefit of Polish aid is in Poland itself," says Maciej Drozd, a former consultant in Warsaw who now works for the Polish prime minister's office. "By giving money to these huge numbers of NGOs to go abroad, you raise global awareness and transform Polish society. I think it's key to name the mentality change that's going on. Five years ago, it was an absolute oddity for people to attend fundraisers for Africa."

After the Belarusian government cracked down on democracy activists in 2006, expelling student protesters from universities, Jan Malicki, the director of the University of Warsaw's Institute for East European Studies, spearheaded an effort to find scholarships and spots at universities in Poland for hundreds of the expellees. Why would students want to come to Poland instead of Germany or the United States? Malicki says it's a matter of perspective: "For people from the East, Warsaw is a true metropolis. It may be hard to imagine, but to someone from Minsk or Tbilisi, Poland is the West."

Today, the Institute for East European Studies hosts teachers from across the former Soviet Union, and offers summer courses for young activists from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Ukraine. Malicki's small program, tucked into a few rooms on the University of Warsaw's downtown campus, is no anomaly: In 2008 Poland provided nearly 5,000 scholarships for foreign students, mostly from Belarus, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. (America's Fulbright program, by comparison, provides about 2,600 scholarships for foreign professors and students to teach or study at U.S. universities each year.)

Poles are adamant that for students from places such as Georgia and Ukraine that are working through their own transformations, Poland's experience and know-how are a useful supplement to the cash and cookie-cutter advice American donors and consultants provide. "We are the children of our Central-Eastern European environment. Therefore, we are—by definition—in a slightly better position concerning

the knowledge about the needs of our eastern neighbors than the U.S. or even Western Europe," Kwasniewski wrote in a recent e-mail interview. "We simply better understand and feel their problems and challenges. It is of course a truism, but we were exactly at the same position two decades ago."

Many in the Polish aid community have criticisms of the government's approach. They complain that aid distribution, spread over multiple competing ministries, is inefficient and opaque. While officials emphasize that Poland spends \$372 million a year on foreign aid, more than any other Eastern European country, more than \$20 million of that represents export credits to encourage China to buy Polish goods; another chunk is debt forgiveness for Cold War-era loans to Angola and Nicaragua, money Poland was never going to get back anyway. (Such statistical sleight-of-hand is fairly standard when countries calculate development assistance.)

Poland also isn't the most generous country among the EU's new members. Although it gives away the most money in absolute terms, it happens to be the largest of the countries that have joined since 2004. As a share of GDP (just .08 percent), its contributions actually place it near the bottom among EU donor countries. The Czech Republic and Hungary, for example, have a quarter as many people as Poland but give half as much aid. And less than 1 percent of students in Poland come from abroad, one of the EU's worst rankings.

What sets Poland apart—and makes it a model worth paying attention to—is its conviction that its past is an asset and a responsibility. Given limited resources, Poles are using foreign aid in a direct, concerted way that benefits themselves and their neighbors. Who better to advise and support democracy movements than people who forged one of the world's most successful ones just a quarter-century ago? Poland doesn't have a lot of experience with disaster relief or food aid, and may not be the most generous. But by concentrating on passing along their hard-won lessons to speed democratic change and economic reform in Eastern Europe, Poles may yet prove themselves the most effective. ■