



NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY

ECONOMICS AND SECURITY COMMITTEE (ESC) / POLITICAL COMMITTEE (PC)

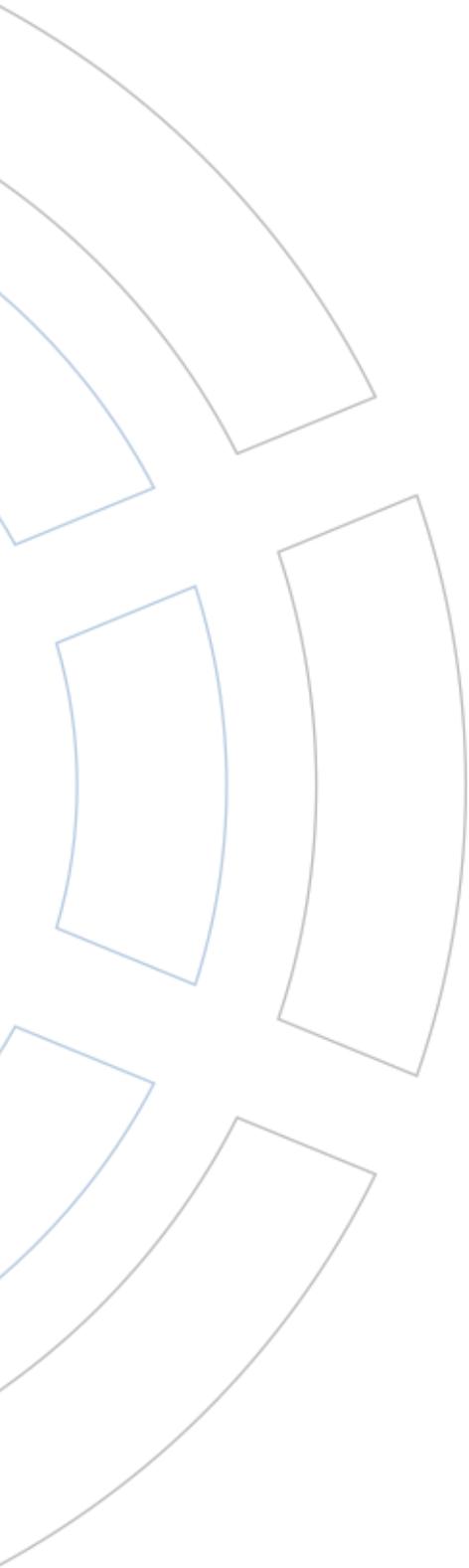
Sub-Committee on Transition and
Development (ESCTD)
Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships
(PCNP)

MISSION REPORT*

Virtual visit to Poland

12-13 April 2021

* This Mission Report is presented for information only and does not represent the official view of the Assembly. This report was prepared by Andrius Avizius, Director of the Political Committee and Paul Cook, Director of the Economics and Security Committee



I. INTRODUCTION

1. Some 22 legislators from 12 NATO countries, members of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's (NATO PA) Sub-Committee on NATO Partnerships (PCNP) and Sub-Committee on Transition and Development (ESCTD) took part in a series of online meetings with Polish officials and experts on 12-13 April 2021, discussing security challenges on NATO's eastern flank as well as Poland's economic situation in the context of the pandemic. The meetings were co-chaired by PCNP Chair Prof. h. c. Dr Karl A. Lamers (Germany) and ESCTD Chair John Spellar (United Kingdom) and hosted by Michal Szczerba, Deputy Head of the Polish delegation.

II. POLAND'S FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

2. **Michal Szczerba**, Deputy Head of the Polish Delegation, expressed his view that NATO is facing many changes and challenges in the coming future and stated that Poland attaches a special significance to its relations with NATO. He also outlined Poland's concern with the growing tensions on their eastern borders and the aggressive nature of Russia's actions in Crimea and Donbas. Poland is also deeply concerned and involved in the Belarusian situation.

3. **Pawel Jablonski**, Poland's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, stressed that the key foreign policy tenets of Poland remain unchanged. These include respect for international law, active participation in regional and international forums, and Poland's attachment to the concept of sovereignty. Within these parameters, Poland looks to achieve the goal of strengthening its security, economic growth, and global standing.

4. The Deputy Minister stressed that NATO plays a central role in Poland's security policy. Though new challenges have emerged, old challenges still remain, he noted. Russia remains the greatest threat for the Euro-Atlantic alliance and the collective policy on Russia must be based on a sober assessment of Russia's attitude, actions, approach, and intents towards the Alliance.

5. Russia's increasing military capabilities at NATO's doorstep is a source of serious anxiety for Poland, the Deputy Minister said. Poland is concerned about Russia's buildup along NATO borders, especially in Kaliningrad, which is becoming an ever more militarised exclave. Russia also continues its conventional and nuclear modernisation. Russia's 2020 military exercises prove they can launch multi-domain military operations and, in 2021, a new military district was created based around the Northern Fleet. Allies should also be aware of Russia's new disruptive technologies – such as hypersonic missiles, abilities to disrupt sea lines of communication, and anti access and area denial capabilities, Mr Jablonski warned.

6. The Deputy Minister expressed support for NATO's dual-track approach to Russia (deterrence/defence and dialogue). Poland also continues to hold the position that economic sanctions on Russia are effective. Mr Jablonski highlighted the need for the Allies to redouble their efforts tackling Russian disinformation campaigns. He also reiterated Poland's opposition to the Nord Stream II project as damaging to the Ukrainian and wider European security.

7. The growing Russian influence in Belarus also has a direct negative impact on the security of NATO's eastern flank. Due to the political vulnerability of the Lukashenko regime, Russia's influence can be expected to deepen, Mr Jablonski said. He also reminded the delegates that, later this year, Russia and Belarus will take part in the massive 2021 Zapad exercise which is held on the borders of NATO states, particularly Poland and Lithuania.

8. Mr Jablonski said that Poland welcomes President Biden's declaration of commitment to transatlantic and multilateral cooperation. Poland also supports the initiative to update the NATO Alliance's strategic concept. He stressed that the Alliance should pay specific attention to credible defence and deterrence, to the coherence of the Alliance based on strong principles of the transatlantic partnership, the strengthening of political resilience, and to the "open door" policy. Although energy security is not a NATO key priority, it remains an enabler with regards to defence efforts and general resilience. Thus, energy supply should be perceived as part of the readiness of Allied troops from a security perspective, and NATO should help bridge infrastructure gaps. Poland believes that the European-American alliance should be reflected in a higher number of US troops in Europe because the physical presence of the United States in Europe is a crucial aspect of European security.

9. NATO-EU cooperation is a key priority for Poland. The complementarity of CSDP and NATO's deterrence role are crucial, Mr Jablonski said. With respect to regional cooperation, regional security formats – such as the Bucharest Nine, the Visegrád Four and the Three Seas Initiative – are very important for strengthening synergies and boosting the potential of countries in Central-Eastern Europe.

III. PANEL ON BELARUS*

10. NATO parliamentarians also focused closely on the situation in Belarus in discussions with Polish and Belarusian experts. Parliamentarians stressed how the entire democratic world was deeply moved by the awakening of the Belarusian nation in the context of the fraudulent presidential elections. They condemned Lukashenko's clinging to power with the support of police brutality, mass arrests, intimidation, propaganda, and with backing from Moscow. Lukashenko's actions show a stark contrast with the bravery of the Belarusian people who continue their peaceful actions despite the climate of terror that the regime created.

11. Belarusian pro-democracy activists thanked parliamentarians for their support and their outspoken position on the political and human rights crisis in Belarus. During the last 8 months of remarkably peaceful protests, the only response from the regime has been violence and lawlessness. So far, the regime has arrested over 35,000 people, prosecuted more than 1,000 criminal cases, and holds 352 political prisoners, and these numbers continue to grow, the delegates were told.

12. Panelists expressed regret that the Alliance is presented by Belarusian state propaganda as posing a threat to Belarus. They noted the importance of NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, which Belarus joined in 1995, and argued that this kind of cooperation will be needed with the new democratic Belarus. Parliamentarians were told that the Belarusian democratic society would support the re-engagement with the NATO PA, where Belarus' associate membership has been suspended since 1997.

13. Sovereignty remains Belarus' main concern, the delegates heard. Belarusians want to live in a genuinely independent country, choose their own leaders, and maintain constructive relations with all of their neighbours. The current political upheaval is not about choosing a geopolitical direction – the Belarusians just want to choose their freedom and independence. At the moment, there are signs that Russia may abuse the weakness of Lukashenko and strengthen its control over Belarus. Russia should receive a clear message from NATO members that Lukashenko is an illegitimate leader and has no right to sign any international agreements on behalf of Belarusians, panelists argued. Agreements to integrate, to sell state

* Session held under the Chatham House rule.

owned assets, and on loans will be revoked by a democratic Belarus, NATO parliamentarians were assured.

14. Panelists also noted that the Belarusian democratic movement has been in talks with the OSCE and EU, as well as leading democratic countries, to advance towards a path for negotiations. These negotiations will center around three major priorities: 1) national dialogue and reconciliation based on the release of all political prisoners; 2) new free and fair elections; 3) reform of the political system, restoration of the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Belarusian interlocutors stressed that it was important that the situation in Belarus remain high among the priorities of the West.

15. One expert argued that even though the protest activity has somewhat receded recently, a high level of social anger and the social delegitimation of Lukashenko has reached the point of no return. Lukashenko may stay in power for some time, but his grip on power will remain in a state of emergency.

16. The panelists also noted the increase of oppression of a number of groups not controlled by the government – such as a recent crackdown on Polish minorities within Belarus. Amongst the power structures, there has been a marginalisation of regime insiders who have wider horizons and who were more pragmatic and more related to the functioning of the economy, while the position of the power sector has been growing, the delegates heard. The local ruling nomenklatura's support for Lukashenko is not unconditional, but it is opportunistic and fears consequences if it stops backing the regime.

17. One expert highlighted a clear nation building component to the protests. The protests in the last eight months have led to a psychological breakthrough and an awakening of the national consciousness. The development of Belarusian national identity has been historically delayed and unfinished due to Russification, and this has now started to change. For instance, people have been gathering under the historical white-red-white flag. Opinion polls continue to show strong support amongst Belarusians for Russia and Russians, yet at the same time over 40% of Belarusians consider Russia to be the greatest threat to their territorial integrity. For the first time, more Belarusians also think that the historical legacy of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is more important for Belarus than that of the Soviet Union. The emergence of a national idea is something which might serve as a remedy to threats against Belarusian statehood, the expert argued.

18. Panelists noted that the Kremlin fears that the democratisation of Belarus would result in greater openness of Belarus towards the West and therefore undermine Russian interests. Even with Lukashenko remaining in power however, this may negatively effect Russia because the situation in Russia itself is currently far from being stable. People in the Russian regions are more and more disappointed when it comes to economic stagnation and there is a risk for the Kremlin that an unstable Belarus will cause a spillover of instability and dissent in Russia, especially during election times, panelists said.

19. They further argued that sanctions on Russia or Belarus is not a silver bullet they do have a deterrence effect. Tough sanctions on Belarus would do away will the business community's belief that Lukashenko can be the guarantor of their assets. The possibility of harsh sanctions on the business elite (the so called "wallets of Lukashenko") can play a huge role. Even the announcement of harsh sanctions or the announcement that the SWIFT system may be shut off can be a significant factor in changing attitudes among the elites.

IV. THE RUSSIAN CHALLENGE*

20. The next session of the online visit was dedicated to discussing the challenges that Russia poses to Poland and to European security more broadly.

21. One speaker welcomed the fact that America and Europe are now doing more within NATO on security and defence than they have done for many years. The consistent strengthening of NATO's eastern flank is a key example of this. After the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008, Poland and other countries proposed 'Article 5' exercises on NATO territory and only after much convincing of western European partners did this happen in 2012. After the annexation of Crimea, there was little NATO opposition to conducting such military exercises as well as deploying rotational battalions to the eastern flank. Today, there are 4,400 American troops based in Poland compared to initial agreements to only host an American missile defence force and a small contingent of Airforce personnel. A Polish representative noted that NATO should further develop the NATO Readiness Initiative, launched in 2018, and in particular shorten the response time for supporting a country or group of countries threatened by aggression. More forces should be dedicated to protecting the Alliance's eastern flank, especially in certain critical locations, such as the Suwalki Gap or the Baltic states.

22. On Ukraine, Polish interlocutors supported granting Ukraine with the Membership Action Plan. NATO should be ready to prepare a much more robust programme of reinforcement for Ukrainian Defence Forces. They also stressed that Georgia is a huge asset for the Euro-Atlantic Alliance. Georgia is facing huge troubles right now, not only from Russia, but also from domestic circumstances, and NATO should engage politically in Georgia as the EU did by sending a special envoy.

23. Another panelist addressed the issue of influence operations conducted by Russia. The global retreat of democracy, the huge financial and corruption scandals, and recent technological developments have all made for fertile ground when it comes to Russia's influence activities.

24. The panelist argued that, especially over the last 5 years, the international balance has shifted in favor of non-democracies. Countries where democracy deteriorated outnumbered those with improvements in 2020 by the largest margin recorded since this negative trend started 16 years ago. In 2019, 52% of the world's democracies experienced democratic erosion of some form. Political parties have experienced major declines in participation. This has a huge impact on how parties function and how easy it is for foreign influence to penetrate them. Populist parties have tripled their support in Europe over the past 20 years. Electoral commissions across Europe have many weaknesses that can be exploited by foreign actors. The expert supported the initiative to establish a centre for democratic resilience within the family of NATO institutions. The NATO PA has a crucial role to play, the expert argued. It is also very important for parliaments to adopt legislative proposals to enhance and improve electoral integrity and to support political parties when it comes to their funding and resilience to cyber attacks.

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V. POLISH ECONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PANDEMICS

25. **Maciej Witucki**, Chairman of Lewiatan (Organisation of Employers), noted that his organisation has been very active in working with the government to try and mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic lockdowns. The Polish economy has been much more resilient than other European economies and the pandemic has revealed that the Polish economy is less dependant on Germany than was once thought. In Poland, as in the majority of European countries, the future of economic development is the same: digitalisation and energy transformation, Mr Witucki argued.

26. On digitalisation, the pandemic has exposed the extent to which digitalisation is important and at the same time fragile. Lewiatan calls upon the Polish and EU governments to accelerate the digital transformation. They are asking the Polish government for more involvement in digital education because although connectivity can be provided by the private sector, education must be provided by the state. In Poland, very high-speed internet still needs development and 15% of the population do not have any access to it. This needs to be fixed to avoid the phenomenon of 'digital exclusion'. Overall, although Poland has a large and growing number of ICT specialists, the number is still below the EU average. 60% of Polish enterprises are considered 'very digitalised' where the EU average is 39%, but only 11% are 'highly digitalised' whereas the EU average is 26%.

27. Due to digitalisation, cyber security is becoming even more important. To combat cyber threats, the private and public sectors will have to work together, Mr Witucki said. Security used to be the monopoly of the state, but in the times of cyber security this is no longer the case.

28. The speaker stressed the need to keep digitalisation green. The ICT sector should be involved in climate plans and funds for digital innovation should support the reduction of emissions. Overall, climate neutrality is a tough target, but it is accepted in the Polish business community. Green transition is also a great opportunity for business. The Polish government has also come to the realisation that the 2050 energy transformation must be met, Mr Witucki said.

29. Poland and Europe have also been very eager to shorten logistic chains since the onset of the pandemic and repatriate various manufacturing and other capacities. This process seems to be more complicated than initially thought, but it is still a necessity. The laws of supply and demand still apply though, and the West cannot build industrial sovereignty at any price on the consumer side, the speaker argued.

30. On 5G technology in Poland, the approach of the private sector has been to balance Western and Chinese sources. The majority of businesses believe it is important to keep a certain level of security in strategic sectors. However, citizens are not ready to pay much higher internet and telecommunication prices, so digital sovereignty cannot come at any price; there must be a balance, Mr Witucki stressed. The current Polish draft law on 5G technology gives a phase-in period which the private sector supports because it allows for some flexibility and is much more reasonable.