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THE 1989 SPRING OF NATIONS: TRANSFORMING THE BASICS OF POLISH FOREIGN POLICY

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The far-reaching events of 1989 were not a result of Gorbachev alone. It took a phenomenon which I will call “making the impossible possible.” The kind of phenomenon that practitioners of “realpolitik”—including those in Eastern Europe at that time—rarely foresee..¹

Tadeusz Mazowiecki

I shall begin the story with the brief review international changes in order to show how they formed the context for Poland’s internal transformation and for the new Poland’s first steps on the international scene.

1. To examine the international situation of the second half of the eighties as a factor impacting changes in Poland we must consider three developments: US President Ronald Reagan’s policies, the internal breakdown of the communist system together with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s attempts to halt this breakdown through reforms, and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. As the first US president who believed in defeating communism rather than co-existing with it, Reagan chose policies intended to lead to the fall of the communist bloc. As luck would have it, he also had the opportunity to realize his goal. As CIA reports show, the communist system fell into structural crisis and systematic failure in the early 1980s. Application of the appropriate strategy could hasten its collapse. The US chose such a strategy, and the results came unexpectedly fast². Already in the late eighties the US was worrying about slowing the breakdown of the communist bloc (including maintaining the stability of the USSR) in order to keep its death throes from endangering the West’s security. The US’s offensive strategy had been on the one hand a reaction to the international expansion of the communist bloc in the 1970s—which turned out to be its swan song—and on the other hand an attempt to make use of the weaknesses that appeared at the start of the eighties.

Both an omen and a symptom of world communism’s crisis was the rise of Solidarity, together with the recognition by Poland’s communist authorities that the only way to oppose this workers’ (or rather national) revolt was to use force—with the declaration of martial law in 1981. Communists who use force against

workers have lost any legitimacy. This was not a purely Polish phenomenon. Influenced by Polish events as well as by the increasing failures of the communist system others began to look for ways out of this crisis. One answer was the Soviet reforms begun by Gorbachev (“perestroika” and “glasnost”), which were read as a signal by the other communist states. But it turned out—as earlier critics such as Zbigniew Brzezinski and Samuel P. Huntington had foreseen—that the communist system was essentially unreformable. Reforms intended to break through its stagnation could only hurry its end. The end of the communist system coincided with the growth of autonomy and eventually independence among the states that had been part of the Soviet sphere of influence.

One more factor remains to be considered. The end of the Cold War was shaped not only by Reagan’s strategic policies together with communism’s structural crisis. Also essential was the West’s support for the liberalization of the communist system. To a certain extent the West’s partners in this were a few reform-oriented communist leaders, but more important was the democratic opposition that emerged in some communist states starting in the mid-seventies. (Earlier anti-communist opposition groups lacked any Western support.) The CSCE process created a framework that made this possible. It was formally enshrined in the Helsinki Accord, signed by Western and Eastern leaders, which obligated its signators to respect human rights and made it possible to link this issue with other spheres of inter-state relations, including economic and security matters. The Final Act’s principles allowed Western states to use trade and lending policies to exert pressure on the communist governments; these principles also provided legitimization for the democratic opposition’s activities. Issues of human rights, basic freedoms, and national self-determination were the primary topic of debate and negotiation in the CSCE. In the course of the discussions the communist states realized that if they failed to make concessions on these issues they would remain isolated and deprived of Western aid for their economic reforms³.

As we know, the cumulative result of these processes was the shockingly fast yet relatively peaceful collapse of communism, first in the Central European

countries (1989) and then in the Soviet Union (1991). The Central European have been called the Spring of Nations. Some Polish authors instead term this the Autumn of Nations, but this is a misnomer. This was a metaphoric “Spring” (as was the original 1848 Spring of Nations, which began in February), a spring consisting of the renewed independence of the region’s nations.⁴ In fact the 1989 Spring began in April with the Polish Round Table accord, which was a huge success for the democratic opposition, leading to partially free parliamentary elections with results that were a crushing blow for the ruling communist party. Moscow’s acceptance of these results, including the formation of a government under noncommunist Tadeusz Mazowiecki, was a signal for the rest of the region. After this, events moved breathtakingly fast. In November failure to stop the wave of refugees from East Germany through Hungary and Poland to West Germany led to the fall of the Berlin Wall. At the same time Czechoslovakia had its Velvet Revolution, while Hungary underwent similar changes. The final event in this process—bloody and thus spectacular—was the overthrow of the Ceausescu dictatorship in Romania (with the dictator and his wife executed lawlessly, just as they had ruled) at the end of December, 1989. Thus the so-called “community of socialist states” had almost ceased to exist.⁵

But as long as the Soviet Union endured, the changes in Central Europe would still be under threat; the independence of these countries was threatened by the existence of the hegemony of the former bloc. It is important to remember that Moscow’s domination of these nations after 1945 had both an ideological motive (the imperatives of communism) and a geopolitical motive, derived from the imperial Realpolitik of Soviet Russia. The signals coming from Moscow for the next three years were very inconsistent, and most frequently deepened the uncertainty as to the actual position of the Soviet Union towards the Spring of Nations taking place on its doorstep.

The unsuccessful putsch in Moscow in August 1991, aimed at stopping the disintegration of the Soviet Union, showed that there were forces in Russia that did not accept communism’s collapse and the bloc’s disintegration. Nevertheless the centripetal forces proved stronger, and on December 12, 1991, the leaders of

Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus confirmed the break-up of the USSR. This did not mean that Moscow renounced hegemonic ambitions in the region, but it gave Poland breathing room that could be used for internal changes and wholesale revision of its foreign policy.

An important component of this rapidly developing situation (especially from the Polish point of view, but also of concern to the Soviets) was the reunification of Germany. The Germans wanted to assure the success of this hugely difficult undertaking, and thus tried to avoid any move that might upset Moscow and thus create obstacles. The very fact of German reunification created a new geopolitical situation in Europe—and for many countries, including Poland, it constituted a serious challenge. It also created the need for new treaty structures, and in the case of Poland this brought up the necessity of confirmation of their mutual border. Some Western countries took very conservative positions in regard to these changes—especially France, which made it clear that its interest lay in maintaining the existing international order, including the order in Europe, and did not show enthusiasm about the geopolitical consequences of the 1989 Spring of Nations.

As Polish historian Andrzej Paczkowski observed, “There are moments in history when the spirit begins to blow as it will.... Something like this happened in Europe in 1989. The Polish impetus proved decisive against the Empire’s military weakness and the helplessness of Marxist-Leninist ideology.... There began a long—and still ongoing—period of the Great Unknown, of social conflicts, which reached an impasse, of battles or of ethnic quarrels, which fell out, rotting, from the communist freezer, where they had remained for decades in a state of hibernation. The end of one history became the beginning of a new one.”⁶

2. The final era of the People’s Republic of Poland was characterized by economic stagnation, resulting in state failure, social apathy, and dissatisfaction based on a feeling of hopelessness. The communist system had lost its last traces of legitimacy during the 1980-1981 Solidarity revolution and the martial law

regime that had crushed it. The new element was that the Polish communist leaders had Moscow's permission to find their own way out of their structural impasse. The existence of a strong democratic opposition in Poland, which had survived the persecution of the early 1980s and managed to rebuild its organization later in the decade, presented the rulers with a potential solution to the crisis—dialog with the opposition. The rulers' strategy was to co-opt part of the opposition, using selected policy concessions to get it to share responsibility for governing the country—and thereby to regain some political legitimacy for themselves. The opposition was not so much interested in participation in government as in reforming the system. (Actually overthrowing the system still seemed an impossibility.)

The first preliminary contacts with Solidarity's leaders took place in summer 1988. The Catholic Church played an important role in the early talks; without the Church serving as mediator and guarantor of the participants' integrity, these talks would not have been possible. The first public reflection of the negotiations between the authorities and the Solidarity opposition was a joint television appearance by Lech Walesa, chairman of the still illegal Solidarity trade union, together with the chairman of the officially sanctioned trade unions, in December 1988. Their debate in front of the Polish public resulted in the clear-cut victory of Nobel Prize-winner Walesa. It also legitimized the opposition in society's eyes, and the authorities began to take further steps towards allowing the opposition to take part in public life. The conditions for that participation were to be determined at the Round Table, a Polish invention that led to a bloodless revolution and political transition. After working out some difficulties concerning the round-table format and the composition of the opposition delegation the negotiations began at the start of February; two months later they concluded with an agreement outlining a scenario of further changes in Poland. This included partially free parliamentary elections, the legalization of the Solidarity trade union, and a significant increase in media freedom.

Using the words of a Roman emperor, we may say that on June 4, 1989, with the parliamentary elections, "the dice were cast," and the result was the

spectacular success of the Solidarity camp.⁷ But it was only on September 12 that “the Rubicon was crossed,” as Tadeusz Mazowiecki, prominent Catholic intellectual and democratic oppositionist, became prime minister of the first noncommunist government in Poland since World War II.⁸

The new deputy prime minister for economic matters was the relatively unknown economist Leszek Balcerowicz, a professor at a Warsaw economic institute, who would become the architect of a comprehensive transformation of the economic system. Poland entered into a period of deep systemic changes in all spheres, changes that were accompanied by crises, political instability, and social unrest. Balcerowicz’s “shock therapy,” aimed at moving from the planned and centralized state economy to an open market economy, together with an accelerated restructuring of the economy, at first deepened the economy’s decline. The already depleted state treasury and the large foreign debt deprived the government of the resources needed to create a social safety net during the economic reform, including any possibility of reducing the rapidly increasing unemployment. The difficulties that necessarily accompany systemic change increased the temperature of political competition during the first years of the Third Republic. This was the unavoidable price of the changes that were restoring Poland to Europe.

Nevertheless, that incredibly difficult and politically unstable four-year period—the birth of the new Republic—was long enough to completely transform Polish foreign policy. This was because the architect of that policy, Professor Krzysztof Skubiszewski, managed to keep it autonomous even in the midst of the bitter domestic political battle. What helped was an unwritten consensus among the Polish political class about the fundamental elements of foreign policy: the orientation towards Europe, and relations with the East. While the internally torn political class was unable to give real support to this policy, at least it did not obstruct it. Poland’s economic weakness was a serious problem during this period, and this created material constraints on its means of carrying out foreign policy.

3. “Poland’s national interest requires that in the coming years we must confirm our regained sovereignty, assure the security of our state, support the economic and civilizational development of our nation and society, and strengthen our position on the international scene, especially in Europe,” said Minister Skubiszewski in the course of one of the parliamentary debates on the topic of the RP’s national interest⁹ This was in the fourth year of defining and realizing Polish sovereignty. To make this possible it was necessary to establish the new elements of Polish foreign policy: first, its principles and goals, and then its directions, its formulations, and their new content.

The most important matter was the regaining of sovereignty. This theme was already clearly present in Mazowiecki’s historic speech in the Sejm on September 12, 1989: “We desire to live with dignity in a sovereign, democratic state ruled by laws.”

The prime minister of the new Poland added that “international relations based on sovereignty and partnership are more stable than an order based on domination and strength,” and that “relations with the Soviet Union should be structured with respect for the sovereignty of our state, with us completely free to form our own domestic policies.” Skubiszewski presented this idea even more clearly in his first international appearance in his new role, his speech at the UN’s General Assembly on September 25, 1989. Referring to the military implications of the geostrategic location of Poland (and the entire region), he asserted that “it is possible to deal with the consequences of this objective fact,” and base Polish foreign policy “on the fundamentals of external sovereignty and internal independence.”¹⁰ This would mean that the government must continue what Polish society had already begun—the geopolitical transformation of Eastern Europe. Specifically this meant the rejection of the division of Europe into spheres of influence. “Security areas cannot be the same as spheres of influence,” the Polish minister emphasized to the General Assembly in New York. Referring to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, he called for an end to the influence that “certain

past events have exercised on an essential part of our contemporary international relations.”¹¹ 1989 was the beginning of the great changes, of which Poland was both an author and a beneficiary, but these changes were far from over. Poland would have to continue to play those roles in years to come, in order to make those changes irreversible. Poland declared its willingness to work towards a certain “vision of peace and freedom in a region that in contemporary times has too frequently been an arena of conflicts, division, and domination.”¹²

The transformation of the principles of Polish foreign policy was most visible in its fundamental geopolitical reorientation. Regaining sovereignty made possible Poland’s return to its place in Europe. After 1945 Poland may have remained in Europe, and its citizens remained Europeans, but the communist system of which it was part was opposed to European values and principles. Poles could not participate in the creation of an institutional framework for a united Europe, and they remained outside the community created after WWII by the nations of the western half of the continent. This was the meaning of the slogan, “Return to Europe”, which was questioned by those who did not understand its deeper sense.

The changes of 1989 and after, in both domestic and foreign policy, were an expression of that desire for a return to Europe. The European orientation became a basic theme in Polish foreign policy after regaining sovereignty. Of course its realization would take years, but from the very beginning Polish leaders made clear that their goal was to return Poland to Europe and to the West, as well as to make Poland a European (Western) country in the full sense of that term.

The Western (European) direction occupied a major place in the official speeches of Prime Minister Mazowiecki and his successors, as well as in the speeches of the foreign minister and other leading politicians from the Solidarity camp. More formally this meant the rebuilding and strengthening of bilateral relations with the main Western European states, as well as creating relationships with the multilateral institutions that arose after WWII for the purpose of consolidating the Western world. True, in the first months of the

Mazowiecki government official speeches still included assurances that Poland was ready to respect its alliance obligations and to cooperate with the countries of the CMEA (but not in the Council itself). But—as later events would show—these assurances were an application of the “better safe than sorry” principle, aimed at avoiding a nervous reaction or determined opposition from Moscow. For the same reason the goals of the “Western direction” were revealed gradually, as the situation in Europe evolved (in which Poland actively participated). This process of switching signals in Polish foreign policy could be seen, for example, in Skubiszewski’s successive parliamentary speeches, especially in 1990-1992.

Rather than making light of Poland’s relations with its eastern neighbors, the foreign minister emphasized that “Poland’s return to Europe,” to the Western world, was a priority. He made clear that he was convinced that only a solid grounding of Poland in the Western community would make possible effective policies towards its Eastern neighbors.¹³ The Western direction also had deep significance for Poland’s security. As it left the Eastern bloc, Poland could not afford to find itself in an unstable and uncertain Central Europe deprived of institutional ties to the West.

“We never considered neutrality. We already made that clear last year when we began to systematically develop ties with the North Atlantic Alliance. This was because we were conscious of the actual security inequality in Europe, which works to our disadvantage. We have consistently opposed making the region in which Poland is located any kind of buffer zone, or grey area (from the security point of view),” wrote Skubiszewski at the beginning of the 1990s.¹⁴ But before the West could spread its political umbrella over Poland and the other countries of Central Europe, it would be necessary to “strengthen” that region by developing close cooperation, both bilateral and multilateral, primarily on security matters. The creation of the Visegrad Triangle (discussed later in more detail) was part of this.

The creators of the basics of the new Poland’s foreign policy had to respect one important element of the new regime’s legitimacy: the Solidarity

ethos, including the ideas that had been proclaimed in the 1989 Spring of Nations. Both Mazowiecki and Skubiszewski frequently referred to these values and principles in the new foreign policy. During his first international appearance at the UN in 1989 the foreign minister declared, “We will strive to completely eliminate ideology from international relations, but that doesn’t mean that we reject an international morality. Ideology and morality are two separate things. For us, morality and respect for the individual remain the most important values.” In this same speech he emphasized the need to observe fundamental principles of international law and announced Poland’s intention to quickly sign important human rights agreements. On another occasion he noted the presence in the definition of Poland’s national interest of certain intangible values: “These are honor and respect. Respect for oneself and for others. [...] This does not preclude making wise compromises, which are the essence of politics.” He went on to say, “In our striving for greatness, our state and nation must observe principles of public morality. We should not fear morality, that morality that comes from our Christian roots. We cannot separate our concept of *raison d’etat* from morality and respect of the rights of the individual.”¹⁵

Emphasizing national values as imponderables in Polish policy, Skubiszewski pointed out the need to “distinguish these from nationalism. In other words, the values, concepts, and ideas that we want to use must be more nuanced and defined.” He decidedly rejected the national “blimpishness,” which is usually “comical”, and which “various tub-thumpers among us don’t understand.”¹⁶ It would be a mistake, however, to think that Polish diplomacy of this period was excessively idealistic. Quite the opposite. It was firmly based on solid ground, and persistently strove to assure Poland not only security but also support for its ongoing economic and social transformations. Skubiszewski himself emphasized this—for him the fundamental strength of the state was always the economy: “An economically weak state has limited possibilities of operating on the international arena.” Poland’s chances above all lay in “organizational and economic effectiveness,” and foreign policy’s duty was “to

create possibilities for external economic support for reconstruction and for the civilizational modernization of the country.”¹⁷

The transformation of the fundamentals of foreign policy took place in unfavourable external and internal circumstances, although of course it was possible at all only because the international environment of the country had changed.

The internal systemic transformation was accompanied by unavoidable political turbulence. Years later Mazowiecki reminisced that at the end of their first meeting in Moscow, in November 1989, Gorbachev told him, “It may surprise you, but I hope you succeed.” But this remark does not give a true picture of the situation. Gorbachev was not alone. On the topic of Poland’s changes, he was “under various pressures” (as reported by Skubiszewski) from those desiring to maintain Moscow’s hegemonic position. In its first months the Mazowiecki government was operating in the awareness not only of its communist surroundings but also of “interventionist projects coming even from Bucharest.” Thus the government concentrated on “gradually creating facts, and not on radical but empty words.”¹⁸

As for the domestic context of foreign policy in this transitional period, there was already talk that the volatility of the political scene, the fragility of the new democratic institutions, and the economic disaster inherited from the PRL could not be a solid foundation for diplomacy. Although Minister Skubiszewski managed to achieve a strong position, thanks to which he could not be excessively constrained by later prime ministers, there would still be serious friction and tensions: “The Olszewski governments were difficult,” Skubiszewski commented after leaving office. “This was because he allowed his co-workers, including some ministers, to dangerously play around and interfere in the foreign policy sphere. Moreover, [...] there were continual delays and standstills. Of course in our ministry we had to cope with this.”¹⁹ And here we must emphasize that in Skubiszewski’s first years there were huge personnel changes in the foreign affairs ministry—greater turnover than in any other ministry after 1989. The

minister himself has explained this: “When the nature of the state is changed, when we stopped being dependent upon the Soviets, personnel changes in the Ministry during my four years were necessary. To be specific, people who had been loyal to the Soviet bloc, who had carried out the bureaucratic work of a satellite, who moreover were not qualified, were not suitable for the diplomacy of an independent state.”²⁰

Finally it is important that in Poland, as in any democratic state, there were conflicts about foreign policy, about its priorities and about the choices that were made. Different orientations and attitudes battled among themselves. Looking back, it is hard to remember the intensity of those conflicts or the heat of the debates. Today many of those arguments can seem anachronistic or even exotic. But at the time there were few good points of reference. Most frequently the models were found in the decidedly outdated examples of the Second Republic; the critics often lacked competence or even the will to patiently figure out what Polish interests might look like in the late twentieth century. It would be hard to figure out to what extent those attitudes were a result of external inspiration and to what extent they were common stupidity or personal ambitions covered with the cloak of national interest. The atmosphere of that debate and the heated polemics can be seen in a careful examination of the contemporary press and parliamentary stenograms, which the interested reader might care to undertake.

Very frequently, however, the ideas and choices around which the conflicts revolved were serious. Besides the European (Western) orientation—realized with Benedictine patience and precision by Skubiszewski and his team on Szucha Avenue—there were several other interesting approaches to the foreign policy of the reborn Republic. Strong at first were nostalgic ideas of maintaining close relations with the USSR, and later its successor, Russia. These emphasized the supposed advantages that could come from “privileged” relations with Moscow and the necessity of respecting its security interests as a great power; they constituted a reaction to the supposed American dictatorship over Poland. (“Poland has just exchanged one dictator for another.”) Also strong at that time

was a naïve and wishful approach suggesting that Poland could become a “bridge” between the West and Russia, and take advantage of this. Even if one overlooks the semantic weakness (bridges are there to be marched over, something that Poland had sufficiently experienced in its past) there was no need at all for such a bridge. Another popular idea at the beginning was the Central European-Intermarum approach. According to this, Poland could play the role of keystone and leader of the region stretching from the Black to the Baltic Sea. Here the problem was that Poland did not have the resources to play such a role, and—more importantly—no one of any importance in the region wanted Poland to do so. Some right-wing voices demanded immediate entry into NATO, which in 1990-1991 was an utter daydream—if for no other reason than the complete lack of willingness of NATO itself to undertake talks on this topic. Nevertheless the government’s lack of effort in this direction was a pretext for intense criticism of Minister Skubiszewski and others. Some right-wing parties, national-populist in orientation, demonstrated an ostentatious distaste for closer relations with Germany. They displayed their fears and prejudices in accusations against the various governments and especially Skubiszewski for “betrayal of the national interest.” Jerzy Giedroyc and his supporters criticized what they considered Skubiszewski’s excessively European orientation. In their words, “No one in Europe is waiting for us,” and, “knocking on the doors of European salons isn’t worth it.” They argued that Poland should instead rebuild its ties with its direct neighbors to the East.²¹

In the face of such criticism and various kinds of pressure Skubiszewski showed a stubbornness and consistency worthy of admiration. He did not allow himself to be diverted from his chosen and consistently followed course of action. As a proponent of organic work, he felt a distaste for the vain gestures, and flourishes typical of the Polish political class. Each step had to be well-prepared and to open new possibilities. He was an excellent debater, although he preferred calm, reflection, and balance. To stinging, sometimes unpardonable insults he replied, “Those who criticize me offer no alternative,” (and the foreign policy projects arising outside the Ministry were “pitiful and tossed out”).²² Professor

Skubiszewski did not enter the ministerial building on Szucha Avenue with a chosen team of his own (such as, for example, Balcerowicz's team at the Ministry of Finance and in the Office of the Council of Ministers). Nevertheless with relative quickness he acquired a group of good and loyal co-workers. These included some who had worked in foreign affairs previously, but primarily consisted of people from different backgrounds (primarily academic and intellectual, including former democratic oppositionists). They shared his views and constituted solid support for his policies. ("I am very grateful to my co-workers. Without them I could have done very little.") Skubiszewski's international reputation (before 1989 he had been one of the most prominent experts in international law), his personal integrity, his rare ability to listen and discuss, and his strongly European (Western) identity and intellectual approach (rooted in Christianity) allowed him to serve as the architect of a foreign policy meeting the needs of the reborn Republic.

4. Two issues were essential for the independence and sovereignty of the new Poland in the first months of its existence. The first was the problem of its borders with the reunited Germany, and the second was the withdrawal of Soviet troops from its territory.

The border issue emerged after the Berlin Wall fell as the "2 + 4" talks (the two German states together with four great powers) began, aimed at working out the conditions for reuniting Germany. The problem for Poland was not the actual inviolability of its western borders. No one realistic, in Germany or elsewhere, could expect that the fall of the Iron Curtain would change these borders.

What was a shock for Polish public opinion, including the Solidarity politicians who for years had been involved in the process of Polish-German reconciliation, was the lack of any reference to Germany's borders with Poland (or with other neighbors) in Chancellor Helmut Kohl's ten-point program for the reunification of Germany presented at the Bundestag on November 28, 1989.

Warsaw's response was almost instant. On December 7 Skubiszewski made a long speech before the Polish parliament stating the Polish position on this issue. Briefly reviewing the difficult history of Poland's relations with its western neighbour, he stated, "Nevertheless, history is not and cannot be the deciding factor in the formation of today's reality. Europe is changing. We do not deny these changes, we desire them, we are a co-creator of them. But we must watch over our national interest..." The heart of his presentation was the assertion that "the recognition of the western border of Poland without any qualification is the cardinal prerequisite for Polish-German reconciliation," as well as for the unification of Germany, which was a component of the process of the unification of Europe. This unambiguous statement had the support of the entire Polish political class, and became the basis for Polish efforts to get the support of the four great powers, which soon, and with little enthusiasm, were to occupy themselves with this matter.

The first to give its support was France, which did not hide its own fears arising from German reunification, with its unavoidable consequence of changing the European balance of power to the disadvantage of Paris. French support for the matter of the Polish-German border was gained through an extraordinary visit to Paris by an unusual Polish delegation consisting of President Jaruzelski, Prime Minister Mazowiecki, and Minister Skubiszewski, on March 10, 1990. Using the slogan, "Nothing about us without us," Polish diplomacy also succeeded in including Poland in the phase of the "2 + 4" talks addressing the borders of the newly united Germany. In the meantime Poland had managed to get the US's unconditional support for its position concerning the border.²³ Moscow and London took similar positions. Thus all the great powers agreed that the Oder-Neisse border belonged to the "external aspects of Germany unity, together with questions of the security of neighboring states."²⁴ Because of internal concerns (parliamentary elections) Chancellor Kohl had evaded this issue for several months, which had worried Warsaw and caused it undertake several political-diplomatic maneuvers, but now he accepted Poland's position, already supported by the four great powers.²⁵

From this point on, the process moved along quickly and problem-free. On November 13 and 14, 1990, there took place short talks—not even deserving the title “negotiations”—on Warsaw’s proposal, culminating with the foreign affairs ministers of both states signing a treaty confirming the existing Polish-German borders. In the opinion of Professor Jan Barcz (one of the participants in the talks) what was important was not so much the confirmation of the existing borders but rather the declaration of both states that these borders were “inviolable now and in the future,” together with their commitments to unconditionally respect each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity.

5. The same task to the east was qualitatively more difficult. Formally and legally it was a matter of dissolving the Warsaw Pact and getting Soviet/Russian troops out of Poland. As of the first half of 1989 such a prospect was unimaginable for the Round-Table participants. The international context excluded even discussion of such a possibility. This was confirmed by the public utterances of both Prime Minister Mazowiecki and Minister Skubiszewski in fall 1989 and in the first half of 1990. They assured Moscow of their intention to respect Poland’s bilateral and multilateral alliance obligations, while nevertheless expressing hope that in the not-too-distant future military blocs would cease to be the basis of European security. This approach was strongly justified by the existing international order and Poland’s internal situation, by the lack of any signals by Moscow or the West that any change in alliances was possible, and by the fact that the German situation (and particularly its Polish aspect) was still unresolved. This was to a certain extent a delaying game, including resistance to suggestions of renegotiating the Warsaw Pact (modifying the Pact would have meant assent to its continuation, which Poles wanted to avoid)²⁶ This began to change in the second half of 1990.

The resolution of the German problem, Jaruzelski’s resignation (together with the dismissal of the ministers of defense and of internal affairs, both from the *ancien regime*), Walesa’s victory in the presidential election, and especially

the ongoing disintegration of the Soviet Union (leading Moscow to concentrate rather on trying to preserve the USSR rather than maintaining the Soviet bloc) all together created the possibility of liquidating those institutional tools used by the Soviets to control their satellite states. Non-communist forces had come to power in all the other Warsaw Pact states; Moscow had no partners for maintaining the old-style relationships, something that the Kremlin probably realized sooner than did Western leaders. Attempts by Moscow in summer 1990 to maintain—at a minimum—the coordination function of the Warsaw Pact clearly failed. Three Central European countries decided to take advantage of this situation; while they were still not ready to create the Visegrad Triangle, they shaped the direction and timing of regional changes. The joint work they began in late fall 1990 quickly bore results. Already on February 24, 1991, the Warsaw Pact's advisory political committee (now composed of heads of state rather than communist party leaders) met in Budapest and decided to liquidate the Pact within a few months, and to dissolve its military structures even earlier (by the end of March). The protocols of the final dissolution of the Warsaw Pact were signed by its member states in Prague on July 1, 1991. The agreement dissolving the “equally defunct” CMEA had been signed a few days earlier, on June 28.

The expulsion of Soviet/Russian troops turned out to be a qualitatively more difficult task. Negotiations on this issue were decidedly the hardest faced by Polish diplomats in the first years of the Third Republic. They may still be the most difficult negotiations since Poland regained its sovereignty—although, in truth, the stakes were the actual regaining of full sovereignty. As in the case of the Warsaw Pact's dissolution, serious initiatives on this issue had to wait until autumn 1990. It is easier to annul a treaty—when the two sides agree—than to withdraw an army; the latter is not just a political task but also a logistical, organizational, and financial challenge. It also takes time. What mattered here was not only the changing Russian political context but also the simultaneous problem of withdrawing Soviet forces from an already reunited Germany. (These troops were supposed to leave the territory of the former East Germany by the end of 1994.) Germany was able to pay Moscow a formidable “contribution” to

make its exit easier. Even if Warsaw had had the funds for such a “contribution,” Poles did not feel they should pay for the withdrawal of quasi-occupation forces. In addition, while for political reasons Moscow treated Germany as a partner, it continued to view Poland more as a vassal state.

In September 1990 the Polish minister of foreign affairs sent the Soviet government two memoranda concerning talks about the withdrawal of Soviet troops, other issues resulting from their stay in the territory of the Republic, and the transit of Soviet troops from Germany through Poland. First exchange of positions revealed serious disagreements on all the important issues. Poland demanded the withdrawal of all troops by the end of 1991, reparations for the ecological damages they had caused, payment for their stay after 1989, and that the troops from Germany be largely returned by sea. Moscow wanted to keep its troops in Poland through 1994. The lack of any willingness by the Soviets to respect Polish interests caused several crises and incidents during the talks as well as in the course of the withdrawal of the troops from Germany and later from Poland. This began in January 1991 with the apparently dramatic “train crisis,” when Poland decided to block the transit of Soviet troops from Germany. After this crisis Moscow took the Polish stand in the troop withdrawal negotiations somewhat more seriously, but it still was reluctant to compromise. As certain concessions concerning the timing of the withdrawal became possible, Moscow stood fast on its material demands. It cunningly proposed that the assets left behind by the Soviet Army could be used by new joint Soviet-Polish companies. Experience had shown that such enterprises would not only carry out semi-legal business but also serve as a cover for espionage activities. After the August crisis in Moscow the negotiations moved along briskly.

On October 26, 1991, the negotiators managed to initial an agreement on the troop withdrawals, although not about financial issues. In spite of all this, Soviet troops had begun to gradually and quietly withdraw already in 1990, but this process was shaken as a result of the Soviet Union’s break-up (December 12), and its replacement with Russia as its legal and political successor. As a result of the fall of the USSR, together with the departure of Gorbachev, whose influence

had already drastically fallen, Russian thought and political language was immediately dominated by the Realpolitik school. Characteristically, the interests and goals that shaped Soviet foreign policy were now presented under the rubric of the “justifiable security interests” of the new “democratic Russia.” This resulted in Russian pressure to revise the already agreed upon paragraphs by adding clauses and amendments adversely affecting Polish security interests. This was resisted by Warsaw until the day before the agreement was signed, during Polish president Walesa’s visit to Moscow. Walesa himself played a significant role in this, since he was able to reach agreement with Boris Yeltsin (who at the time showed a great deal of friendliness towards Poland). This agreement, signed on May 22, 1992, foresaw the withdrawal of all Soviet combat units by November 15, 1992, and the withdrawal of remaining troops by the end of 1993. In reality, that final deadline was more than met. The last Russian soldier left Polish soil on September 16, 1993 (the day before the anniversary of the Soviet attack in 1939)²⁷

For Poland’s external sovereignty this was a fact with a fundamental—and not purely symbolic—significance. Poland had regained its freedom of maneuver in its security policy, especially in the context of its already announced intention to apply for membership in the Atlantic Alliance. Poland’s battle to regain full sovereignty and to have its territorial integrity and the inviolability of its borders recognized had yielded a result that would have been unthinkable just three to four years earlier, on the eve of the Central European Spring of Nations of 1989.²⁸

¹ T. Mazowiecki, Making the impossible possible, Rzeczpospolita, November 6, 2004.

² It was a combination of military measures (a radical growth in the arms race), economic measures (the embargo and other restrictions in economic relations with the Soviet Union), and ideological measures (an ideological offensive, symbolized by the description of the USSR as the Evil Empire). For more on this see R. Kuźniar, Politics and power, Warsaw 2005, V.

³ R. Kuźniar, Human rights. Law, institutions, and international relations, Warsaw 2004, VIII (about the CSCE process)

⁴The term “Autumn of Nations” would omit Poland’s role in this process, since its Round Table and critical elections took place in spring of 1989. See M. Howard’s article in Foreign Affairs

(1990), *Springtime of Nations*, for a metaphorical use of the latter term to describe the events of 1989.

⁵ R. Kuźniar, *From the Spring of Nations to the Great Transformation*, "Polityka Polska" 1991, nr 1; A. Paczkowski, *The Autumn of Nations '89: the end and beginning of history*, "Tygodnik Powszechny" October 24, 2004.

⁶ See, for example, A. Hajnicz, *The twists and turns of Polish foreign policy, 1939-1991*, Warsaw 2006, p. 62.

⁷ Solidarity's candidates won all 161 Sejm seats for which they were allowed to compete (against officially "non-party" candidates supported by the ruling parties), as well as ninety-nine out of the one hundred Senat seats (in free elections).

⁸ This government included representatives of the communist party (who controlled the interior and defense ministries), as well as representatives of the peasant party and the regime-sponsored "democratic party." As Adam Michnik had suggested with his slogan, "Your president, our government," the president (elected earlier by the National Assembly) was Wojciech Jaruzelski, who had previously been both prime minister and first secretary of the communist party.

⁹ *Raison d'être of the Polish Republic*, January 21, 1993, K. Skubiszewski, *Polityka...*, op. cit., p.301.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.21.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 16 and p.21. Tadeusz Mazowiecki expressed the matter similarly in his Sejm address of September 12, 1989, cited above.

¹² K. Skubiszewski, *Ibid*.

¹³ Minister Skubiszewski thus rejected Giedroyc's paradigm of Polish foreign policy. Giedroyc would have made policy towards the East the priority, asserting that "the more we mean in Western Europe, the greater role we can play in the East." The obvious flaw in this thinking was this: if Russia prevented Poland from playing a serious role in Eastern Europe (its sphere of influence), that would take away Poland's chance to occupy an important position in the European community.

¹⁴ K. Skubiszewski, *Polish foreign policy in 1991*, in: *Yearbook of Polish Foreign Policy 1991*, Warsaw 1993, p. 16.

¹⁵ *Raison d'être...*, op cit.

¹⁶ *Foreign policy—some fundamental questions*. Interview with Krzysztof Skubiszewski for "Polityka" October 17, 1992 (with Krzysztof Mroziewicz i Wiesław Władyka).

¹⁷ See among others: *Polish policy*, op. cit.; *Raison d'être...*, op. cit. Addressing the Sejm on September 7, 1990, minister Skubiszewski admitted that: "Given our current economic situation, from time to time in our foreign policy we have to fudge various things because we are still so weak economically..." in "Foreign Policy and..." op. cit, p.81.

¹⁸ We built Polish foreign policy from scratch, interview with Krzysztof Skubiszewski for "Tygodnik Powszechny," April 11, 1994 (with W. Beres, K. Brunetka, and A. Romanowski); *Making the impossible...*, op. cit.

¹⁹ We built Polish foreign policy..., op. cit.

²⁰ *Ibid*. Minister Skubiszewski was sharply criticized for those changes, not only by representatives of the old regime who were losing influence on foreign policy, but also by those who not received the high-ranking or lucrative appointments in the foreign service that they felt they deserved.

²¹ See among others, R. Kuźniar, *A new Polish foreign policy*, "Sprawy Międzynarodowe" 1991, 10; J. Stachura, *Political parties and Polish foreign policy*, *Yearbook of Polish Foreign Policy 1992*, Warsaw 1994.

²² The interview for "Polityka" cited above.

²³ This was a result of minister Skubiszewski's meeting with US Secretary of State James Baker, during the conference for signing the treaty on open spaces, in Ottawa, February 12-13, 1990.

²⁴ In the words of the communiqué issued at the end of the Ottawa conference.

²⁵ Also see the excellent collection of documents on this topic of the Polish-German border: W. Borodziej (ed.), *Poland and German reunification, 1989-1991. Diplomatic documents*, Warsaw 2006. Also the volume by M. Tomali.....

²⁶ See minister Skubiszewski's speech in the Polish Senat, September 7, 1990, in: *Foreign policy and...*, op. cit., p.80.

²⁷ On the negotiations about the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Poland, see above all G. Kostrzewa-Zorbas, *The Russian Troops' Withdrawal from Poland*, in: A.E. Goldman (ed.), *The Diplomatic Record 1992-1993*, Boulder 1995; M. Menkiszak, *Bad neighbourhood: the security issue in relations between Poland and the Soviet Union/Russia, 1989-2000*, in R. Kuźniar (ed.), *Polish security policy 1989-2000*, Warsaw 2001.