

Interview with Minister Boguslaw Winid of the Polish Embassy. (Translated from Polish)

IA Forum discusses issues facing Poland and Polish-American relations with Minister Boguslaw Winid of the Polish Embassy to the United States. By Michal Kwiatkowski. (IA-Forum, 10/1/2005)



International Affairs Forum: For years Poland has been balancing its relations with the EU and the US. According to your opinion will the recent ascension of a center-right government will alter this balance?

Dr. Bogulsaw Winid: No, this will not create any significant changes. If we look at the development of Polish foreign policy after 1989, we have seen changes in the composition of the government every four years. Parties change, governments change but the interests of the nation remain the same. Therefore I do not foresee any dramatic change in the Polish foreign policy in respect to Polish-US relations.

IA Forum: How would you evaluate Poland's support for the invasion of Iraq? How has Poland benefited from having Polish troops supporting the US-led coalition?

Dr. Winid: Already we see that this move has made a dramatic difference on how Poland is looked upon in the international community. Poland's active involvement in the war has elevated us to a different class in world politics. We are now part of a group of countries that are the decision makers in Europe as well as the world. We have taken on the mantle of leadership in our region and Europe in general.

On the military side of the question, Polish armed forces have gained valuable experience and financial aid through our involvement in Iraq. It has also greatly boosted the prestige of our soldiers. There were opinions circulating that our troops would not be able to effectively cooperate and fight along with the technologically advanced American forces. As it turned out the Polish soldiers have proven themselves to be fully capable to be full-time allies on the modern battlefield. This is wonderful news for us; it is a fact we should be very proud of. It is hard to find many other countries that could, in such a short period of time, assemble, equip, and maintain such a sizable contingent on the other side of the

world. Our soldiers have performed superbly in the harsh combat missions assigned to them. Unfortunately, 17 of our men have paid the ultimate price, with over a hundred being wounded. That means 17 families mourn their dead, while many wounded will carry the scars of this conflict for the rest of their lives. This is extremely unfortunate but this operation was necessary for the national good. We have proven to the world that after 50 years of communist occupation we have been able to rise up into the ranks of decision makers of the world. In addition, as Iraq rebuilds we will also increase our economic cooperation with the new republic. We hope this new relationship will be mutually beneficial to both countries.

IA-Forum- Given the very pro-American stance of the new right-wing parties in the Polish government, is there any chance that the planned pullout of Polish troops will be delayed?

Dr. Winid- That is a hard question to answer. We have stated that we need to change the focus of our operation from combat to training. In the upcoming years the key objective will be ensuring Iraqi forces are able to gain operational effectiveness and independence. Also there are other factors to consider. This is the 5th rotation of Polish troops in Iraq, which means that over 20,000 Polish troops have served in this Iraqi. One also has to remember our operations in the Golan Heights, the former Yugoslavia, and Afghanistan. Basically, two factors are limiting our ability to remain heavily involved in Iraq. One is our policy of single rotations where, for a number of tactical reasons, troops are not allowed to be deployed twice to the same mission. In addition, one has to take into consideration that the Polish ground forces amount to a little over 100,000. This means that we reached a certain limit of our personnel capabilities. But this does not mean Poland will cease its support for anti-terrorist operations around the world. In 2007 Poland will be taking over command of the NATO contingent in Afghanistan, which will require we send another 1,000 troops to aid with the operation there. With all due respect, we are not yet militarily powerful enough to run two major operations so far from our borders. We are not a super-power and one has to measure capabilities versus aims. But the subject is still open to discussion and after the presidential elections this subject should be clarified.

IA-Forum- Let's talk about the other major element of Poland-US relations. Immigration has always been a sore spot between the two countries. The high fees for visa consideration, exclusion of Poles from the Green Card lottery, and acceptance of Poland into the Visa-waiver program are probably the most controversial issues in this debate. How do you see the new government attempting to resolve these critical issues?

Dr. Winid- Indeed. One thing that is very apparent is that Poland is being discriminated against in the Visa-Waiver program and we strongly protest this discrimination. After Poland's integration into the EU there is no danger of some mass influx of Poles into the US. This is an example of stereotyping, using old

data, and bureaucratic inertia that casts a shadow over Polish-US relations. Our experiences in the EU have proven that there is no danger of some sort of mass immigration to foreign countries and these fears are totally groundless.

The fee for visa consideration is standard all around the world and we really do not have a problem with procedure. The same thing applies to the green-card lottery; the exclusion is based upon US regulation of the amount of Green cards issued. In recent years the percentile of Poles that received the Green Cards was very high so we understand the rationale for excluding Poles from the lottery. But denial to be admitted into the Visa-Waiver program is outright discrimination against Polish citizens and we will push hard to ensure Poland's acceptance into the program. We hope that the introduction of biometric data on Polish passports next year will speed up the process and dispel these harmful stereotypes.

IA-Forum- What is the timeline that you foresee for the resolution of this problem? Will this be solved in the near future or will Poland have to wait for the next US elections.

Dr. Winid- I cannot really comment on that. But I do hope we will be able to resolve issue as fast as possible.

IA-Forum- In the Post-Soviet region, namely Russia, Byelorussia, and Ukraine, how do US and Polish interests align? Should the new government in Poland do more to get the US involved in the changes that are occurring in that region?

Dr Winid- I do not want to comment too much on what the new government will do, but I'll say this: Poland and the US have closely aligned interests in the region. We both want to promote democracy, free-markets, civil society, and human rights. Human rights are an especially important link between the US and Poland in this region. The US has always considered human rights as an important motivational factor in its foreign policy.

Meanwhile Poland is very concerned about the treatment of the Polish minority in Byelorussia as well as the democratic revolution in the Ukraine. We have worked hard to support the democratic movements in these two countries and the US has been very supportive of our efforts. We are especially happy about the recent democratic revolution in the Ukraine, despite its recent problems. But that is to be expected. I will not comment on the interior affairs of Ukraine but such changes are rarely orderly and easy. One can just look at our history, President Walesa and Premier Mazowiecki openly competed. Revolution has to run its course, but we are very happy to see the process well on its way.

Byelorussia it's a very different situation. We hope to jointly develop a mechanism to persuade the Byelorussian government to respect basic human rights and restore democracy. There are elections coming up in both the Ukraine

and Byelorussia and we are hopeful that they will propel the stabilization and democratization of these two countries.

IA-Forum: Thank you for you time sir.

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