



# DEMOCRATIC FOREIGN POLICY —A FUNDAMENTAL OF OUR COMMON STRENGTH



# INTERVIEW

Poland's Foreign Minister Dr Zbigniew Rau  
in a conversation with Sławomir Dębski,  
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**Sir, the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique set of circumstances. How are they affecting the management of foreign policy?**

Foreign policy is both a dialogue that informs governments' positions and a constant search for deeper levels of cooperation to pursue national interests. For this reason we persistently strive to have high level political discussions during personal diplomatic meetings. But the pandemic certainly complicates the daily work of diplomats by limiting possibilities for personal interactions, advising, and reaching compromises. The fact of the matter is that the number of foreign visits has dropped. Paradoxically, one consequence of a foreign minister leaving his office less frequently is the demand for more direct participation in all multilateral formats. And believe me, there are a lot of them. So as a foreign minister during the pandemic, I take part in various "virtual" conferences where I present the Polish point of view on a daily basis.

Even though the pandemic affected conditions and methods of communication between governments, it did not stop political life. The opposite seems to be true: new areas for state cooperation and competition have emerged. European integration continues to be one of the most important tools of the Polish foreign policy. As an international organization, how has the European Union coped with challenges posed by the pandemic?

We will be able to answer this question with more certainty once the pandemic has been fully eradicated and once we have grasped the magnitude of the economic, social, and political changes caused by it. The EU is not an autonomous institution but an organism called to life by states through an international agreement. They did this in order to realize important goals via common institutions. From this perspective we can say today that the European Union turned out to be a useful instrument in

battling the pandemic and its fall-out. It prevented the disintegration of the common European market when states decided to introduce restrictions on economic activity. Thanks to this, the member states came to terms over activating an unprecedented financial package to save the European economy, jobs, and ultimately the European standard of living. Although we will only be able to evaluate the results of our activities in the future, the European Union has no doubt passed the test as a political instrument of its member states. This instrument worked and showed its effectiveness in developing a common response to the challenges presented by the pandemic.

**However, during the work on the EU financial aid package we were confronted with a new chapter in the so-called dispute over the rule of law. Attempts were made to condition financial flows instruments devised by the European Union on member states' respect for the rule of law. On one side of this dispute were both the European Commission and Parliament, as well as a considerable number of member states. On the other were Poland and Hungary, two states currently facing reviewing procedures over the rule of law as initiated by the**

**European Commission under Article 7 of the Treaty on European Union. Over the past few weeks you actively participated in this debate, first by publishing an article in “Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung,” and the by giving an interview to “Le Figaro.” Have the decisions made in December by the European Council ended this dispute?**

Prime Minister Morawiecki was able to convince our European partners to activate an economic aid package and adopt a seven-year EU budget in a manner that prevented this legal-political dispute from getting in the way of actually disbursing these funds, something that the European Commission could interpret as a broadening of its own powers. The purpose of the public appearances that you mentioned was to clarify the Polish position to the European public. I pointed out that Poland fully supports combating financial misuse and embezzlement of EU funds while at the same time, as a party of the Treaty on European Union, stands by upholding order and principles of legalism that define how public authorities – in this case the EU – can only act in set legal terms, that is within competencies stipulated by the treaty. They have no right to either presume or independently interpret them. This relates to the European Commission, the European

Parliament, as well as the European Court of Justice. We succeeded in calling member states' and the European Commission's attention to possible troubles associated with this. All admitted that threats exist and pledged to avoid them. This is significant progress.

**Vice President of the European Commission for Values and Transparency Věra Jourová** stated, however, that she will “take care of Poland and Hungary” by seeking to “cut funds from Poland and Hungary” on the basis of the so-called rule of law mechanism. It appears that she has no intention of subordinating to the European Council’s resolutions.

I am not fond of this sort of political eristic. After all, we are talking about European funds, meaning also Polish ones. They are generated not only from contributions of member states but also by their open markets. It is always worthwhile to recall how structural funds harmonize the activity within the common market and remain interdependent with them. I believe however, that we are dealing with a deeper issue here. The political and legal activism of EU institutions – European Commission, European Parliament, European Court of Justice – is a fact. They intend to broaden their authority beyond the competencies originally

defined by the EU law, meaning the treaty. This is a deviation from the European integration process that must be eliminated at the political level by the member states. At the legal level – via the European Court of Justice and member states’ constitutional courts which, it is worth adding, are authorized to control activities of EU institutions, including judgements levied by the European Court of Justice, within the scope of competencies conferred on them in treaties. If there is an abuse of power, we will react accordingly by political and legal means. I’d prefer to see everyone in the European Union focusing on efforts to avoid such situations. We will certainly discuss this with Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and encourage her commissioners to share our approach.

Toward the end of last year, the European Commission, together with the German EU presidency, unexpectedly accelerated negotiations and the EU decision making process, thereby leading to the signing of an investment agreement between the European Union and the People’s Republic of China. Poland reacted negatively to this turn of events, as you indicated in one of your posts on Twitter. You suggested that the EU should have first coordinated its position

**with the incoming Biden-Harris administration in the U.S. before reaching an agreement with China. Does this mean that Poland will apply an “America First” doctrine in its European politics?**

In foreign policy, the Morawiecki cabinet will be guided exclusively by Polish national interests. I do believe however, that these interests will be easier to realize under conditions of constructive cooperation between the European Union and United States in global politics and trade, a sphere in which both parties are powerhouses. It is almost certain that coordinating negotiating positions would have led to securing better terms. Undoubtedly, it would have provided a much needed positive impulse for early transatlantic cooperation with the Biden administration. If anyone thinks that such possibilities appear regularly, then they know nothing about politics.

**Do you therefore believe that the European Commission and the German presidency made a political mistake on China?**

Poland is interested in developing the best possible, stable relations for mutually beneficial economic and trade cooperation between the European Union and China. The EU is a community of democratic states, which in practice means

that every international agreement demands the approval of all member state governments and the European Parliament—they must gain support of the public, a type of social ratification if you will. Meanwhile, the European Commission conducted negotiations based on a mandate it received nearly seven years ago. Over that time governments changed several times in a number of EU member states. From the popular support perspective, this raises justified doubts as to whether or not the European Commission’s mandate has expired. We could have checked this by giving ourselves more time and engaging in discussions on rules for global trade policy with the new, democratically elected U.S. administration. In general, I feel that the Commission’s mandate to conduct any sort of negotiations should be limited to the European Parliament’s term and renewed only after the next Commission’s election. In this case, there is no need to change the treaty. This is a good democratic standard. After all, in many national parliaments, the government mandate to act, including introducing new laws, ends once parliament’s term comes to an end. Democratic renewal of the mandate should not be a meaningless procedure without any impact on the European Commission’s executive agenda.

**Still, the investment agreement with China was signed. What next?** Europe's democratic tradition is a source of its strength. The agreement will now become the subject of debate, the results of which will affect the process of shaping EU's strategy toward China as well as Sino-European and EU-U.S. relations. However, it ought to have been the other way around. We should have first discussed UE political goals toward China, thereby searching for a democratic consensus on this issue. On this basis, we could have renewed the Commission's mandate to negotiate an investment understanding with China. Meanwhile, an agreement was signed and the lack of a democratic consensus in relation to EU strategy toward China means that she will be the subject of political dispute in Europe, both in member states and in the European Parliament. As a result, Sino-European relations will be shaped under uncertain circumstances while time runs out. I believe that such a situation may not be beneficial to either the European Union, Poland, or China.

**But the European Commission and the German EU presidency argued that in December 2020 the Chinese side suddenly made significant concessions during negotiations. Are you not convinced by the**

**argument that it was in the interest of the European Union to quickly discount this change in the Chinese negotiating position?**

Let's be realistic. The negotiations were about a pact of fundamental importance for the EU as a shaper of global trade standards. Negotiations lasted for six years. They were led by



over a dozen EU member states during their respective EU presidencies. Truth be told, nothing would have happened if they were extended over the course of another two or three presidencies. Meanwhile, the European Commission and the German presidency brought upon Europe long-term problems organized in an extralegal format all for some quick media fireworks. What kind of global standard are we setting when we employ procedural tricks to avoid political and social debate about an agreements that will impact the lives of our citizens

for decades to come? After all, during future negotiations, if the EU decides to invoke European legal or political decision-making standards, if EU's representatives raise the need to adhere to democratic procedures, they might be rebuked—based on



the case of the Chinese investment agreement—that these are not key issues of importance for the EU! That they lack the political will to seal the deal! I am therefore concerned that instead of strengthening the EU's global position, we might have set precedent that will weaken Europe and the transatlantic community as a whole. For the United States and Canada, the European Union becomes a source of uncertainty, and that could develop into a lack of trust. Poland is striving to strengthen transatlantic ties, thus such development would obviously be very unfavorable.

Some European commentators claim that in the face of the crisis

of American democracy, Europe should not wait idly, but rather go ahead protecting its own interests. They point to the disturbing images of the sacking of the U.S. Capitol by a mob questioning the result of the democratic election. More generally, do these events mean that America has lost its ability to lead the free world?

Absolutely not. Political, institutional and systemic crises occur frequently in every democratic state. That's the nature of this system. During my academic career I studied the history of the American system, so I have a slightly different perspective than that of many outside observers of the recent events in Washington. There had been many difficult moments in the history of the United States, including the successful assassinations of presidents. Every democracy has the ability to self-correct, but the American democracy is particularly resilient and capable of mounting a response to a crisis, always perfecting its institutions and procedures. It will be the case this time as well. I am convinced that America will emerge stronger out of present turmoil, and that it will give new impetus to American leadership in the free world.

What are Poland's expectations after the inauguration of the Joe Biden administration?

As a United States ally, Poland is pleased with the declarations that the Biden administration intends to strengthen America's global engagement. The incoming administration intends to make a priority out of rebuilding the credibility of the U.S. alliance system. This is a goal that converges with our Polish foreign policy that over the past three decades consequently advocated strengthening America's status as a European power – meaning an ally that reinforces European defensive and deterrence capabilities and maintains a considerable military presence on the continent, thereby contributing to peace on the continent. We regard U.S. involvement in European peace as a matter of fundamental importance for Polish security.

**The Biden camp has signaled that the new administration will uphold the American engagement in the Three Seas Initiative, something that has gained bipartisan support in the U.S. Does this also justify optimism for the future of Polish-American relations?**

Joe Biden is an icon of transatlantic cooperation. A politician who throughout his entire career supported strengthening NATO and Alliance's open door policy. Members of the Three Seas Initiative are the beneficiaries of these policies. Today

this region is the fastest developing part of Europe. Effectively realizing the American vision of a "Europe whole, free, and at peace," so poignantly stated by President George H. W. Bush in May 1989 – one that initiated the political transformation of Europe following the Cold War – is the greatest American foreign policy success of the past half century. And Joe Biden was one of the underwriters of this success! Today the Three Seas Initiative continues to follow this American thought about Europe's future as a region which is united not just politically, but also integrated economically, with a well-developed infrastructure. Over the past thirty years the countries of our region have demonstrated readiness to not only be beneficiaries of American or West European political visions, but to also contribute to their development and success. We in turn want to share this success with our closest neighbors who still cannot participate in transatlantic and European integration. I am convinced, however, that with the help of the Biden administration the policy of open door to NATO and the EU will once again be a flagship project of the free world. Poland will wholeheartedly support such policy. For this reason, when thinking about transatlantic and Polish-American relations, I am optimistic. And that's

because the U.S. needs Europe and Europe still needs the U.S.!

**My last question tackles more general issue. Before assuming the foreign affairs portfolio in the Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki's cabinet, you chaired the parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs. How did this change of roles and responsibilities in the process of foreign policy making influence the way you see Polish foreign policy now?**

An interesting question, indeed. If I were to point out one factor whose meaning in foreign affairs I appreciate much more today than in the past, it would be time. Pursuing foreign policy is a process,

so time plays a key role in it. First of all, all new ministers inherit the activities and decisions undertaken by their predecessors. They continue many previously initiated policies but under different circumstances and in a timeframe stipulated by the constitution that stems from, among others, a political mandate assigned by voters. Second, time is also an important factor in day to day aspects. Politics is all about time management, something that is extremely scarce, especially if you also take into account performing MP responsibilities, like voting regularly and frequently visiting ones electoral district.

Thank you for your time, Minister.

