

Remarks on the 'wobbly' nature of the 'Polish Tectonic Plate' (PTP): an ontology of a frontier
West-East state and how to anchor Poland in the West

Stanisław Puppel

Abstract:

The essay proposes a conceptual interpretation of Poland's historical and geopolitical condition through the metaphor of the 'Polish Tectonic Plate' (PTP). Poland is viewed as a frontier state situated between two contrasting civilizational matrices: the West and the East. This particular location has historically generated a persistent structural instability, described metaphorically as the 'wobbly' nature of the PTP. Moreover, this location has resulted in recurrent oscillations between Western and Eastern political, cultural and institutional preferences. It is assumed that throughout her history Poland has been subjected to a cycle of external attitudes ranging from contempt, hostility and denigration to sympathy and partial approval. These changing attitudes are conceptualized in the form of a pentagon (five-node political cycle) including: contempt/enmity, annihilation, final solution, negative alert, and sympathy-approval. Moreover, the instability of Poland's geopolitical position is further explained by the tensions between two systemic matrices: the Western matrix, historically associated with evolving forms of democracy and institutional pluralism, and the Eastern matrix, characterized by absolutist, autocratic and totalitarian political traditions.

The essay briefly illustrates how Poland's political orientation has oscillated between these two poles. It is concluded that long-term geopolitical stability requires a decisive and permanent anchoring of Poland within the Western matrix. Moreover, stabilization would depend on both external support from Western democratic institutions and an internally acquired political consciousness of the entire Polish populace. Only then, would Poland's permanent anchoring in the West be fully accomplished.

My excellent English teacher who taught me conversational English during my studies at the Department of English at Adam Mickiewicz University (UAM, 1966-1971), a great English lady who really loved Poland, used to tell me with great sadness in her voice: "Stanisławie, it seems that Poland is doomed forever!". Long after graduation and in the entire course of my long academic career, those words echoed in my mind in frequent reverberations and with ever increasing clarity. After years of reflecting on what I had heard from my teacher, I finally was able to capture their precise and gloomy meaning with reference to Poland's fate through the geological metaphor of the 'tectonic plate'. The plate, while placed underneath all the political perturbations of the Polish State and perhaps of the entire European continent, surfaced as a real shaper of the undeniably tragic fate of the Polish state in the course of Poland's stormy existence, especially in the last two centuries.

More precisely, the 'wobbly' nature of the Polish Tectonic Plate (PTP) is assumed here to be the result of Poland's being 'hung', as it were, at the crossroads between the West (Occident) and the East (Orient), thus contributing to her (I will always refer to Poland as 'she') constant occidental-oriental fluctuations. In the course of her millennial history, Poland somehow avoided being anchored firmly in either of the two poles, which finally resulted in a solid and combined reaction of both the West and East in abolishing the Polish independent state positioned right in the centre of the European continent.

As an ephemeral organism functioning on the early 'democratic' premise of class equality and 'golden freedom' (Polish nobility, to be precise, which managed to establish a political order of longer duration known as *Aurea libertas*), Poland had for quite some time focused the attention of her aggressive and plundering neighbours (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) as well as of other European mights, most notably Great Britain (and to a lesser extent of France, but also of the Vatican always acting on the premise of the uncompromising prolongation and proliferation of the Catholic faith on the Polish territory), in the most negative of senses. That is, Poland always evoked international (stately) contempt and indignation, or to a milder degree, deep and prolonged indifference and lack of any interest in her doings, as well as maintaining a firm need to keep her away from any stately existence. The entire duration of the XIXth century was indeed more than illustrative of this really marked standpoint of the European mights. They all acted in a surprising political unison, as if instinctively allied on this point, and according to the following simple political formula: "Keep Poland dead for as long as is only possible, thus avoiding the wobbly nature of the PTP as a source of international political uncertainties and to the extent that contact between/among all the European mights is ascertained and maintained as unperturbed as possible!".

This very simple but effective formula worked in an unobtrusive way and the PTP, as a result, was very effectively annihilated (i.e. neutralized) during the Polish Partitions, the tragically stateless and enslaved condition of the Polish society. However, the catastrophic (in terms of population and infrastructure losses) and indeed devastating outcome of WWI (in terms of the destruction of the major Polish enemies) turned out to be extremely positive for the PTP, for its existence was recovered. Soon, however, its inherent wobbly nature started to reemerge and after the rebirth of independent Poland in 1918, the new European order, traditionally represented by the major European mights, including defeated Germany, started

to demonstrate the same features: contempt, enmity, indifference, even amusement and ridicule, and, above all, impatience with this newly activated PTP .

One should, perhaps, recall at this point a number of quite illustrative opinions and attitudes expressed by some distinguished representatives of the West and East, such as, for example, Edmund Burke (1729-1797) who stated in 1793: *With respect to us Poland might be, in fact, considered as a country in the moon.* Tsar Nicolas I (1796-1855) stated in 1831 that: *I don't know if there will be a Poland, what I am sure of is that there will be no Poles.* Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) stated in 1896 (in his play entitled *Ubu roi ou les Polonais*) that: *As to the action which is about to begin, it takes place in Poland - that is to say, nowhere.* One should also note the negative attitude towards Poland represented by David Lloyd George (1863-1945), the British Prime Minister, who was extremely hostile towards this newly established state during his entire term of office, or the German Nazi propaganda which referred to Poland as some kind of a *Saisonstaat*. That is why Poland's prewar existence (in the years 1918-1939) was basically shaky, for it was not met with unconditional international acceptance but was, instead, filtered through differing official and private attitudes, ranging from acceptance (e.g. France), to indifference, enmity, neglect and denigration (e.g. Great Britain), to open hatred, total rejection and plans for the final solution of the so-called 'Polish question' (Nazi Germany). The fully wobbly nature of the PTP took its high toll.

To be more precise, the alternating workings of the PTP can be accounted for in terms of a pentagon whose five nodes are occupied by the following 'verbal labels', with each of them containing appropriate semantic content and political salience of long duration:

1. contempt/enmity (C/E)
2. annihilation (A)
3. final solution (FS)
4. negative alert (NA, indignation)
5. sympathy and partial or complete approval (S-A).

Its graphic presentation is shown below (Fig. nr 1)

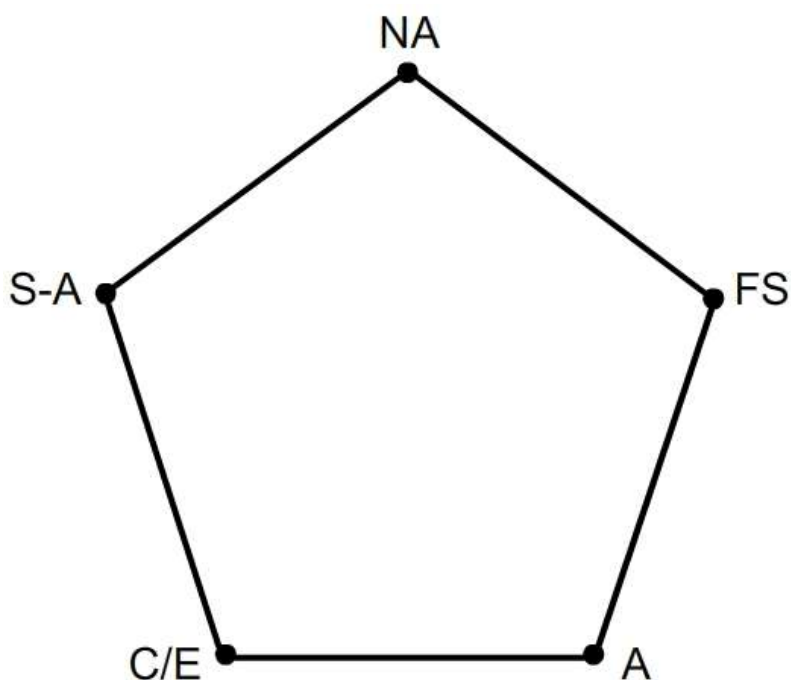


Fig. nr 1

The pentagon of the PTP with its verbal labels (see the text).

In fact, the above nodes may be thought of as forming a complete cycle of possibilities in the political history of any frontier state, such as, for example, the classic case of Poland. In the particular case of the PTP, and probably also holding for any country found in the position of being a frontier (border) state, the aim is to stabilize its 'tectonic plate' in the most favourable node, that is, the node of 'sympathy and approval' such that the wobbly condition of the plate is removed, weakened or at least avoided.

The Polish case of a frontier state is particularly illuminating here, for it epitomizes a country (state, culture, civilization, collective mental state, etc.) which has always stood at the crossroads between the West and the East, where this fundamental distinction may be characterized by means of a dichotomy of matrices composed of a number of well-established constituents. The content of these matrices is the following:

matrix for the West (W) with its constituents

early Greek democracy

early Roman democracy

Roman absolutism

Religious Catholic absolutism

Royal European autocracy

State totalitarianism (Hitler, Mussolini)

Modern (ultimate) state democracy (with obligatory human rights and free trade as the foundations)

Note: It is worthy of noting that the label '(state) democracy' embraces the western matrix constituents in their evolutionary sequence.

matrix for the East (E) with its constituents

Mongol absolutism

Imperial Russian absolutism

Religious Orthodox absolutism

Totalitarian theocracy

State totalitarianism (Stalin)

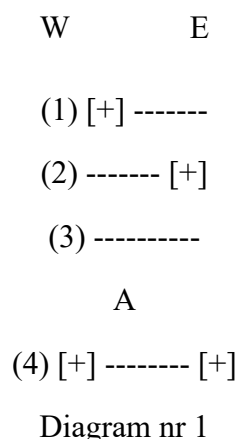
State autocracy (Putin)

State-owned and state-controlled economy with a high degree of corruption penetrating this constituent

No concern whatsoever for human rights in any of these constituents.

Note: It is worthy of noting that the matrix for the East lacks any programmatic reference(s) to the constituent of '(state) democracy' in any form.

In the course of her existence, Poland's demonstrably unstable fate, obviously the result of her being placed on the wobbly PTP, oscillated hopelessly between the West and the East. These oscillations, especially referring to the modern era, may be represented graphically in the following ways:



where:

(1) represents Poland's unconditional acceptance of the West's political, economic and cultural guise (Poland between the years 1989-2015), but founded on strong historical antecedents (most notably the Polish Kingdom under the Piast dynasty),

(2) represents Poland's unconditional acceptance (imposed on her by post-war agreements) of the East's political guise (Poland at the time of the communist regime, the years 1944/45-1989), but founded on strong Eastern inclinations of the Polish Kingdom under the Jagiellon dynasty,

(3) represents the state of annihilation (A, or, at least, immobilization/neutralization) of the PTP (initially at the time of the Polish Partitions, 1772-1918) and again during the Nazi German occupation, 1939-1945). During these time intervals, Poland ceased to exist. In this way, the West was directly aligned to the East, that is, the two poles of the dichotomy were immobilized such that the West-East divide existed without any interfering presence on the part of the PTP,

(4) represents the Polish state somehow sustained between the West and the East (the rule of the right-wing conservative party, PIS, 2015-2023). At that time, a number of unconstitutional moves, especially of the judiciary nature, were administered by the ruling party in an attempt to shift Poland clearly towards the East. The dramatic distinction could best be expressed as follows: Poland was infatuated with the Western economic standards and at the same time contaminated by the autocratic standards of the East.

This apparent instability in Poland's recent and not so recent history was, no doubt, the source of the internationally highly variable attitude (including long-term *polonophobia*) developed towards Poland as an independent state. It was also the source of the development

of a typical (if not perennial) Polish people's resentment and general lack of a clear vision as regards her international conduct both at present and in the future. Such a state of affairs may be the result of a lack of a collective and well established Polish political consciousness which would allow for a precise and transparent way of 'staying aloft' on the Western side of the West-East dichotomy, but also for explaining to (and educating) the Polish populace the deep nature of these wobbly oscillations (fluctuations) so that the course of Poland's international doings clearly within the Western matrix would be consciously pursued and firmly established. All this may be attributed directly to the underlying wobbly nature of the PTP outlined above and to the really tragic lack of determination on the part of the Poles, in historical terms, in choosing the right (i.e. Western) pole of the dichotomy.

In the light of the above, one may conclude this brief essay by stating that the final anchoring of Poland in the West should be the result of tipping (i.e. overloading) the PTP decisively and permanently towards the West. One may venture to say as a final conclusion that this definitive outcome should be the result of a combined effort of the West (the external factor) and of the enlightened Polish populace (the internal factor) in the joint fabrication of this tipping of the PTP. Otherwise, the PTP will keep its wobbly condition very much alive and Poland's fate will forever be both unstable and unpredictable and her doomed condition will be kept forever.

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