Executive summary

Euroscepticism has been a feature of Polish politics for years, but anti-EU sentiments in Poland have recently grown. As recently as May this year, just 58% of Poles expressed support for Poland remaining in the European Union: a significant decrease from only two years ago, when 72% of Poles supported Poland continuing its EU membership.

At the same time, Grzegorz Braun's radically anti-European, politically extreme Confederation of the Polish Crown (KKP) was recently polling at over 13% in some polls. Even Jarosław Kaczyński, since 2003 the leader of Law and Justice, Poland's largest opposition party, has recently begun talking about the conditions upon which Poland could leave the European Union.

All this is taking place only ten years after the United Kingdom voted to leave the EU, and many of the same arguments that have been used to argue for Brexit are now being rehearsed in Poland: whether that be those surrounding migration or sovereignty. And though Brexit has not come to the UK without a cost, that cost would be small fry compared to the potential consequences of Polexit for Poland.

Still, much as had happened in the UK in the run-up to Brexit, pro-European politicians in Poland too often fail to make a positive case for Europe, instead merely defending the status quo.

Consequently, examples of Poland losing its standing within Europe are aplenty. To name just one, despite being the sixth largest economy and the fifth most populous country in the EU, in a recent reshuffle of

the EU's diplomatic corps, of 33 newly appointed ambassadors, not a single one of them is Polish.

Anti-European narratives in Poland and their proponents can be divided, broadly, into two categories: moderate and radical. While moderate anti-Europeans want to re-affirm Polish sovereignty within the EU and, to that end, reverse inter-European integration, they also want Poland to remain in the EU. Radical anti-Europeanism's goal, on the other hand, is not merely to re-affirm Polish sovereignty, but for Poland to leave the EU altogether and to radically distance itself from Europe.

Underlying almost all this is an argument about sovereignty, yet this argument takes different forms. The report identifies six leading sources of anti-European sentiment in Poland.

1. **Democratic concerns.** In the words of a former Minister of Education, Przemysław Czarnek, "in the European Union we are dealing with an enormous democratic deficit, we are dealing with authoritarian rule which has nothing but disregard for the rule of law." Both moderate and radical anti-Europeans in Poland contend that the EU is an anti-democratic institution, or at least that it harms democracy in Poland, especially in the aftermath of Poland's judicial controversies.
2. **Migration.** In the aftermath of the 2015 European migrant crisis, both moderate and radical anti-Europeans in Poland contend that the EU promotes and forces Poland to adopt a harmful migration policy.
3. **Environmental policy.** Especially since the adoption of the European Green Deal in 2020, both moderate and radical anti-Europeans in Poland contend that the EU promotes and forces Poland to adopt a harmful environmental policy, unsuited for the Polish economy's unique energy mix.
4. **Cronyism.** Both moderate and radical anti-Europeans in Poland contend that the EU facilitates cronyism. This spans both the

EU's relationship with Prime Minister Donald Tusk — the political nemesis of Law and Justice in particular, but also of much of the Polish political right — and the EU's supposed favouritism towards Western European countries and decision-makers, and especially Germany and Germans.

5. **Left-wing social policy outlook.** Both moderate and radical anti-Europeans in Poland contend that the EU, and especially Western Europe, generally favour an excessively left-wing, progressive social policy outlook. Instead, Polish anti-Europeans would rather see a "Europe of Nations" based on Christian traditions and values.
6. **Failures to confront Russia.** While the critique that Europe has failed to adequately confront Russia is a source of anti-European sentiment among anti-Russian, moderate anti-Europeans, Russian influence is simultaneously a direct source of pro-Russian, radical anti-European sentiment in Poland.

The report then seeks to draw lessons for Poland from the development of anti-European and Eurosceptic narratives in the UK from the time it joined what was then the European Economic Community (EEC) in January 1973 until its departure in 2020, a period during which two referenda were held on the subject, and four Prime Ministers were brought down by it.

Unlike in Poland, the UK saw only three main sources of anti-European sentiment which, in the UK, took primarily only one form: Euroscepticism.

1. **Sovereignty.** Initially a minor concern of the British left in the 1975 Brexit referendum campaign, it emerged as the main concern of the British right in the run-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum. And although greater sovereignty remains a benefit in theory, in practice, many British businesses remain bound by EU rules, while successive British governments have used up much of their polit-

ical capital debating Brexit rather than making full use of the UK's theoretical sovereign freedoms.

2. **Economy.** While in the run-up to the 1975 vote, it was primarily the left which rallied against what was then the EEC for being a capitalist cabal, in the run-up to 2016 it was the right which increasingly portrayed Brussels as holding back UK economic growth through excessive regulation and fiscal contributions. Since Brexit, however, UK growth has not improved, but rather continues to flounder.
3. **Migration.** A non-issue in the run-up to the 1975 referendum, immigration was one of the major driving forces behind the 2016 Brexit vote. The issue was at the heart of the 'Leave' campaign, and arguably represents one of its greatest broken promises. Instead of falling, annual net migration hit a record 906,000 in the year ending June 2023, three years after Brexit had come into being.

Drawing on the UK's experience, the report identifies seven lessons for Poland.

1. **If Brexit was economically disadvantageous for the UK, Polexit would be economically disastrous for Poland.** While synthetic control analysis suggests that Brexit was a slight net negative for the UK economy, with the UK's GDP per capita up to 11% lower than it would have been had the UK remained in the EU, the same method suggests that Polexit would be an economic disaster for Poland. One 2024 study using that method suggests that Polish GDP per capita was 40% higher in 2024 than it would have been had Poland never joined the EU.
2. **Concerns around sovereignty, not economics, are enough for a country to leave the EU.** The people who voted for Brexit rarely did so for economic reasons. Polling from 2016 shows that the pro-Remain side comprehensively won the argument on the economy. Job prospects, the cost of living, economic security and in-

vestment by international companies were considered, on average, to turn out better if the UK remained in the EU than if it left. By far the strongest arguments for Brexit, on the other hand, were the "ability to control our own laws," "border controls" and "the immigration system."

3. **Populism and Euroscepticism go hand-in-hand.** It is the populist parties in Poland which have spearheaded Eurosceptic narratives in Poland. And it was a populist party which provided the political fuel for the 2016 Brexit referendum: UKIP. Yet Poland already sees a higher level of support for Eurosceptic, populist parties than the UK ever did in the run-up to Brexit: the combined polling share of KKP and Confederation in Poland has been consistently above 20% in all polls for several months now, something which UKIP had never achieved.
4. **The support of the Government is not needed in order to facilitate an exit from the EU.** Polish pro-Europeans must not rest easy in the assumption that, as long as the likely parties of government are against Polexit, Polexit will not happen. By teasing the remote prospect of Polexit, Jarosław Kaczyński is copying David Cameron's answer to UKIP in an attempt to win back voters from KKP and Confederation. The result could well also be a copy of what happened in the UK.
5. **Exiting the EU itself solves nothing.** Of the sources of Eurosceptic feeling in the UK in the run-up to Brexit, none of them have disappeared. On the contrary, many of them have worsened. The UK is, in practice, less sovereign; has likely suffered economically; and has only seen the annual number of immigrants arriving in the country increase since Brexit.
6. **The EU is neither intrinsically left- nor right-coded.** Where what was then the EEC used to be seen more negatively by the British left and more positively by the British right at the time of the 1975 referendum, this had changed by 2016. Pro-Europeans in

Poland should not give up on entire political blocs because they see them as inevitably anti-European.

7. **People do not become pro-EU when EU funds are spent on them.** In the UK, the regions which received the most EU funding voted in favour of Brexit. The same is true for Poland: there is no correlation in Poland between Euroscepticism and the level of EU funds invested where one lives.

Given the above, for Poland to remain in Europe, ordinary Poles must be persuaded that integration with Europe benefits Polish sovereignty and interests specifically, and the interests of their local voivodeship, town, village, neighbourhood and church or football club — rather than having some other, less localised benefits, whether that be environmental, economic or social. Poles must be led to believe, and it must be true, that their home is stronger in Europe — indeed, that their home is not the home they know unless it is in Europe. That Poland is stronger and more sovereign in Europe.

The report makes 11 recommendations to that end, distinguishing between tactical and policy recommendations.

I. **Tactical recommendations:** In order for Europe to be able to win over the sovereigntists in Poland, Europe must be presented to Poles as something that goes together with, not against, Polish sovereignty and identity.
   - **1:** Identify issues where moderate anti-Europeans will support deeper integration with the rest of Europe and build ad hoc policy coalitions around said issues.
   - **2:** Use the language of the sovereigntist right whenever possible when talking about Europe.
   - **3:** Emphasise Poland's existing decision-making achievements within the EU.

II. **Policy recommendations:** Changing the narrative around Europe in Poland will require policy change to come with it — otherwise, any such meaningful change will be effectively impossible.

- **4:** Lead on a coalition of European countries to deepen the EU's common market.
- **5:** Lead on the creation of an *Intermarium* coalition within the EU.
- **6:** Lead on the creation of an anti-foreign interference unit within the EU.
- **7:** Lead on the creation of an EU-level coalition of countries using shared regulatory assessments, procurement and technical requirements for nuclear energy development.
- **8:** Subsidise Polish citizens to sit on European standardisation committees.
- **9:** Allow small- and micro-sized Polish enterprises to access export vouchers covering translation, legal advice and certification abroad for the first 10,000 zł of such costs related to foreign contracts in the EU.
- **10:** Add an extra 30% of European stocks and shares to the tax-free allowance in OKI from 2027.
- **11:** Offer top Polish students subsidies to study at top EU universities on the condition that they return to Poland for a minimum of five years after the completion of their studies.

As we conclude, there are two sets of lessons that can be drawn from Brexit. For Eurosceptics, it demonstrates that you can leave the EU without any catastrophic consequences, and that the tide is turning against the EU. It shows that ordinary, hard-working, rooted people are against the EU and, if they unite, they will overcome opposition from the pro-EU establishment.

For enthusiasts of the EU, it is a case study in regret. It goes to show how leaving the EU fixes nothing, but instead only deepens your problems, and that, after leaving, you will wish you had remained.

Both are right in some respects. In truth, Poland is stronger in Europe, but for a European Poland to survive and prosper, Europe must become a place where those ordinary, rooted people can see their home, with Poland at the heart and brain of it, and with other Europeans as their inalienable friends and neighbours.