

Editor's note: This is the seventh installment in a series of special reports that Dr. Friedman is writing as he travels to Turkey, Moldova, Romania, Ukraine and Poland. In this series, he shares his observations of the geopolitical imperatives in each country and will conclude, in the next installment, with reflections on his journey as a whole and options for the United States.

By George Friedman

To understand Poland, you must understand Frederic Chopin. First listen to his Polonaise and then to his Revolutionary Etude. They are about hope, despair and rage. In the Polonaise, you hear the most extraordinary distillation of a nation's existence. In the Revolutionary Etude, written in the wake of an uprising in Warsaw in 1830 crushed by Russian troops, there is both rage and resignation. In his private journal, Chopin challenged God for allowing this national catastrophe to happen, damning the Russians and condemning the French for not coming to Warsaw's aid. Afterward, Chopin never returned to Poland, but Poland never left his mind.

Poland finally became an independent nation in 1918. The prime minister it chose to represent it at Versailles was Ignacy Paderewski, a pianist and one of the finest interpreters of Chopin. The conference restored the territories of Greater Poland, and Paderewski helped create the interwar Poland. Gdansk (the German Danzig) set the stage for Poland's greatest national disaster when Germany and the Soviet Union allied to crush Poland, and Danzig became the German justification for its destruction.

A history of tragedy and greatness

For the Poles, history is always about betrayal, frequently French. Even had France (and the United Kingdom) planned to honor their commitment to Poland, it would have been impossible to carry it out. Poland collapsed in less than a week; no one can aid a country that collapses that fast. (The rest of the invaders' operations comprised mopping up.)

Wars take time to wage, and the Poles preferred the romantic gesture to waging war. The Poles used horse cavalry against German armor, an event of great symbolism if not a major military feat. As an act of human greatness, there was magnificence in their resistance. They waged war — even after defeat — as if it were a work of art. It was also an exercise in futility. Listen carefully to Chopin: Courage, art and futility are intimately related for Poland. The Poles expect to be betrayed, to lose, to be beaten. Their pride was in their ability to retain their humanity in the face of catastrophe.

I think Chopin can be understood geopolitically. Look at where Poland is. It rests on the North European Plain, an open country whose national borders to its west and east are not protected or even defined by any significant geographical boundaries. To its east is Russia, by 1830 a massive empire. To the west were first the Prussians and after 1871 the Germans. To the south until 1918 was the Hapsburg Empire. No amount of courage or wisdom could survive forces as massive as this.

Poland is neither the master of its fate nor the captain of its soul. It lives and perishes by the will of others. Little can be done to stop the Germans and Russians when they join forces or use Poland as their battlefield. The most Poland can do is hope that powers farther away will come to its aid. They can't. No one can aid a country that far away unless it aids itself. Chopin knew this in his soul and knew that the Poles would not succeed in aiding themselves. I think Chopin took pride in the certainty of catastrophe.

There is a book by Ivan Morris titled "The Nobility of Failure." It is about Japan, but the title resonates with me when I think of Poland, Chopin and Paderewski. The Poles were magnificent in defeat, something I say without irony. But it must be remembered that Polish history was not always about the nobility of failure, nor is this kind of nobility Poland's certain fate. Before the Russian empire emerged, before the Hapsburgs organized southeastern Europe and before the rise of Prussia, Poland was one of Europe's great powers, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

When the Germans are divided, the Russians weak and the Austrians worried about the Ottomans, then Poland stops being a victim. The Poles remember this and constantly refer to their past greatness. It is not clear that they fully appreciate why they were once great, why the greatness was taken away from them or that its resurrection is not unthinkable. The Poles know they once dominated the North European Plain. They are convinced that it will never happen again.

The Poles today want to escape their history. They want to move beyond Chopin's tragic sense, and they want to avoid fantastic dreams of greatness. The former did nothing to protect their families from the Nazis and Communists. The latter is simply irrelevant. They were powerful for a while when there was no Germany or Russia, but they're not now. Or so it would appear. I would argue that this view is lacking in imagination.

Poland, Russia and Europe

The Poles, like the rest of Central Europe, look at the European Union as the solution to their strategic problem. As an EU member, Poland's German problem is solved. The two nations are now to be linked together in one vast institutional structure that eliminates the danger the two once posed to each other. The Poles also think the Russians are not a danger because the Russians are weaker than they appear and because, as one Foreign Ministry official put it to me, neither Ukraine nor Belarus is simply a Russian satellite. Indeed, he thought of Ukraine and Belarus more as buffers. As for the old Austro-Hungarian threat, that has dissolved into a melange of weak nations, none of which can threaten Poland.

Under these circumstances, many Poles would argue that the dangers of life on the North European Plain have been abolished. From my point of view, there are two problems with this perception. The first, as I have said in previous essays in this series, is that Germany is re-evaluating its role within the European Union. This is not because the German leadership wants to do so; Germany's financial and political elites are deeply wedded to the idea of the European Union. But as with many elites worldwide after 2008, Germany's elites have lost a great deal of room for maneuver. Public opinion is deeply suspicious of the multiple bailouts the German government has underwritten and may have to underwrite in the coming years. As German Chancellor Angela Merkel put it, Germans are not going to retire at 67 so Greeks can retire at 58.

From the point of view of Germans — and the least interesting views are expressed by the increasingly weak elite — the European Union is turning into a trap for German interests. For the Germans, a redefinition of the European Union is needed. If Germany is going to be called on to underwrite EU failures, it wants substantial control over the rest of Europe's economic policy. A two-tiered system is emerging in Europe, one in which patrons and clients will not have the same degree of power.

Poland is doing extraordinarily well economically for the moment. Its economy is growing, and it is clearly the economic leader among the former Soviet satellites. But the period in which EU subsidies will flow into Poland is coming to an end, and problems with Poland's retirement system are looming. Poland's ability to maintain its economic standing within the European Union is going to be challenged in years to come. Poland could then be relegated to the status of client.

I don't think the Poles would mind being a well-cared-for client. The problem is that the Germans and other core EU members have neither the resources nor the inclination to sustain the EU periphery in the style the periphery wants to be cared for. If Poland slips, it will have the same sort of controls put on it that are being placed on Ireland. One Polish official made clear he didn't see this as a problem. When I mentioned the potential loss of Polish sovereignty, he told me that there were different kinds of sovereignty and that the loss of budgetary sovereignty does not necessarily undercut national sovereignty.

I told him that I thought he was not facing the magnitude of the problem. The ability of a state to determine how it taxes and distributes money is the essence of the sovereign state. If it loses that, it is left with the power to proclaim national ice cream month and the like. Others, most particularly the Germans, will oversee defense, education and everything else. If you place the budget beyond the democratic process, sovereignty has lost its meaning.

Here the conversation always got to the essence of the matter: intention. I was told over and over that Germany does not intend to take away sovereignty but merely to restructure the European Union cooperatively. I completely agreed that the Germans do not covet Polish sovereignty. I also said that intentions don't matter. First, who knows what is on Merkel's mind? WikiLeaks might reveal what she has said to an American diplomat, but that does not mean she has said what she thinks. Second, Merkel will not be in charge in a few years, and no one knows who comes next. Third, Merkel is not a free actor, but is constrained by political reality.

And fourth, call it what you will, but if the Germans realign the structure of the EU, then power will be in their hands — and it is power, not the subjective inclination as to how to use that power, that matters.

Another conversation concerned Russian power. Again, officials emphasized two things. The first was that Russia was weak and not a threat. The second was that Russian control over Ukraine and Belarus was much less than imagined — neither is fixed in the Russian orbit. On this, I agreed partly. The Russians have no desire to recreate the Russian empire or Soviet Union; they do not want responsibility for these two countries. But they do want to limit Ukraine's and Belarus' options in foreign policy. The Russians will permit all sorts of internal evolutions. They will not permit politico-military alliances between the two and Western nations. And they will insist on Russian army and naval forces' having access to Belarusian and Ukrainian soil.

I do not find the argument about Russian weakness persuasive. First, strength is relative. Russia may be weak compared to the United States. It is not weak compared to Europe or Russia's near abroad. A nation does not have to be stronger than its strategic requirements, and Russia is certainly strong enough for those. True, Russia's population is in decline and it is an economic wreck. But Russia has been an economic wreck since Napoleon, if not before. Its ability to field military power disproportionate to its economic power is historically demonstrable.

I raised the question of European, and particularly German, energy dependence on Russia, and was told that Germany only imports 30 percent of its energy from Russia. I had thought it was 45 percent, but still, I see 30 percent as a huge dependence. Cut that percentage off and the German economy becomes unsustainable. And that gives Russia a great deal of power. And while Russia needs the revenues from energy, it can stand a cut in revenues a lot longer than Germany and Europe can stand an energy cutoff.

Finally, there is the question of German and Russian cooperation. As I have discussed before, the German dependence on Russian energy and the Russian requirement for technology has created a synergy between the two countries, something reflected in their constant diplomatic consultation. In addition, German questions about the future of the European Union have taken them on a more independent and exploratory course. For their part, the Russians have achieved the essentials of a geopolitical recovery. Compared to 10 years ago, Putin has taken Russia on an extraordinary recovery. Russia is now interested in splitting Europe from the United States, and particularly from Germany. As Germany is looking for a new foundation for its foreign policy, the Russians are looking to partner with Europe.

The Polish leaders I spoke to all made it clear that they did not see this as a problem. I find it hard to believe that a German-Russian understanding does not concern the Poles. Yes, I know that neither Germany nor Russia intends Poland harm. But an elephant doesn't necessarily plan to harm a mouse. Intentions aside, the mouse gets harmed.

I think the real point the Poles are making is that they have no choice. When I pointed out the option of the Intermarium with American backing, a senior Foreign Ministry official pointed out that under the new NATO plan the Germans have guaranteed two divisions to defend Poland

while the United States has offered one brigade. He was extraordinarily bitter on this score. Following on the American decision to withdraw from a commitment to construct a fixed, permanent Ballistic Missile Defense installation in Poland and the tentative nature of a rotational deployment of a single Patriot battery, he saw this as a betrayal by the United States of earlier commitments. I lamely made the argument that one American brigade is a more effective fighting force than two contemporary German divisions, but that is debatable at best, and I deliberately missed the point. His charge was that there was no American commitment under the new NATO plan, or at least nothing credible.

Polish self-reliance and the United States

My real response to these points was something different. Poland had been helpless for centuries, the victim of occupation and dismemberment. It had been free and sovereign in the interwar period. It had thrown away its sovereignty by simply depending on French and British guarantees. Those guarantees might have been dishonest, but honest or not, they could not have been honored. Poland collapsed too quickly.

Guaranteeing Polish national sovereignty is first and foremost a Polish national issue. First, a nation does not give away control of fundamental national prerogatives, like its economy, to multinational organizations, particularly ones dominated by historical threats like Germany. Certainly, a nation doesn't do that based on its perception of German intentions. All nations change their intentions; consider Germany between 1932 and 1934. Second, to take comfort from Russia's economic weakness is to deliberately misread history.

But most important, a nation's sovereignty depends on its ability to defend itself. True, Poland cannot defend itself from a treaty signed by Germany and Russia, at least not by itself. But it can buy time. Help may not come, but without time, help can't possibly come. Of course, Poland can decide to accommodate itself to the Germans and Russians, assuming that this time things will be different. It is a comfortable assumption. It may even be true. But Poland is betting its nation on that assumption.

My reading of the situation is that both Polish officials and the Polish public understand that they are safe for the moment but that the future is unknown. They also feel helpless. Poland is a bustling European country, full of joint ventures and hedge funds. But all of the activity only covers the underlying tragic sense of the Polish nation, that in the end, the idea of the Polish nation is not in Polish hands. What will come will come, and the Poles will make a heroic stand if worse comes to worst. Chopin turned this sensibility into high art. In the end, survival is more prosaic, and ultimately harder to achieve, than the creation of art. Or more precisely, for Poland, survival is harder than artistic works of genius, and more rare.

Ultimately, I am an American and therefore less taken by tragic sensibilities than by viable strategy. For Poland, that strategy comes from the recognition that not only is it caught between Germany and Russia, it is the monkey wrench in German-Russian entente. It can be crushed by this. But it can prevent this. To do that, it needs three things. First, it needs a national defense strategy designed to make it more costly to attack Poland than to find way around it. This is expensive. But how much would the Poles have paid to avoid the Nazi and Soviet occupation?

What seems expensive can be cheap in retrospect.

Second, Poland by itself is too light. As part of an alliance stretching from Finland to Turkey, the Intermarium, Poland would have an alliance of sufficient weight to matter that would be free from the irrelevancies of NATO. NATO was the alliance of the Cold War. The Cold War is over, but the alliance lives on like a poorly fed ghost administered by a well-fed bureaucracy.

Poland would need to coordinate with Romania, regardless of, say, Portugal's opinion on the matter. This alliance requires Polish leadership. It will not emerge from it. But Poland must first overcome the fantasy that the 18-year-old European Union represents Europe's millennial transformation into the peaceful Kingdom of Heaven. Eighteen years isn't much time by European standards, and Europe has been looking unwell of late. If Germany bets wrong on the European Union, it will survive. Will Poland? National strategy is based on the worst-case scenario, not on hopeful understandings with transitory leaders.

Finally, the Poles must maintain their relationship with the global hegemon. Certainly, the last years of the Bush administration and the first years of Obama's administration have not been pleasant for Poland. But in the end, the United States has fought three times in the 20th century to prevent a German-Russian entente and the domination of Europe by one power, whether that be Germany, Russia or a combination of the two. These wars were not fought for sentiment; the United States had no Chopin. The wars were driven by geopolitics. A German-Russian entente would threaten the United States profoundly. That is why it fought World War I, World War II and the Cold War.

There are things the United States cannot permit if it can stop them. The domination of Europe by one power tops the list. At the moment, the United States is more concerned about ending corruption in Afghanistan. This fixation will not last. Of course, the United States runs by a different and longer clock than Poland does. The United States has more room for maneuver. Poland also has time now, but it must use it in preparation for the time when the Americans regain their sense of perspective.

The European Union might right itself, and what emerges could be a confederation of equal nations as originally planned. The Russians might go quietly into that good night. Whatever my doubts, it might happen. But the problem the Poles have is what they will do if the best case doesn't emerge. I would argue that there is no nobility in a failure that could be avoided. I would also argue that if you listen carefully to the Polonaise, it is an invitation not only to survival, but to greatness.

The Polish margin of error is extraordinarily thin. What I found in Poland was not an indifference to that margin, but a sense of helplessness coupled with intense activity to do well while living well is impossible. But it is the sense of helpless fatalism that frightens me as an American. We depend on Poland in ways that my countrymen don't see yet. The longer we wait, the greater the chance of tragedy. The Germans and Russians are not monsters at the moment, nor do they want to be. But as Chopin makes clear, what we want to be and what we are are two different things, a subject to be considered in my concluding essay.

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