

# Newcomer, Normal Player or Regional Leader? Perceptions of Poland in the EU<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This study analyses the status of the new EU member states and, in particular, Poland as it is perceived by the representatives of the older EU members. On a theoretical level, it argues that the transformation of the newcomers into “normal players” or even “regional leaders” is dependent on five specific conditions that each of these countries must fulfil. These range from (1) simple compliance with the EU’s basic norms and (2) a sufficient level of orientation in EU decision-making to (3) establishment of the country’s unique policy expertise, (4) the ability to create winning coalitions and finally and above all (5) a willingness to defend the interests of the Union as a whole. On an empirical level, we draw on an extensive set of interviews with diplomats belonging to the permanent representation of the old member states in Brussels. Based on these data, we conclude that (1) Poland has already established itself as a normal EU player fully comparable with the older member states. In terms of the country’s leadership status, (2) Poland has also moved to the position of frontrunner among the new member states. However, the country still fails in at least one criterion: (regional) leadership. This precludes it from becoming a fully respected and leading state in the EU.*

**Keywords:** *European Union, Poland, new member states, perceptions, leader*

Although the so-called new member states<sup>2</sup> (NMS) have been part of the EU for some time now and the academic literature has explored their position from many perspectives (for example, Böhmelt – Freyburg 2013; Copeland 2012; Copsey – Houghton 2009; Houghton 2009; Pridham 2008; Tosun 2011), we still know much more about their pre-accession period than about their behaviour and activities within the Union since joining it in 2004 and 2007

1 Matúš Mišík gratefully acknowledges financial support from Slovak Research and Development Agency grant no. APVV-0484-10. We are grateful for the comments made by anonymous reviewers and would also like to thank all the interviewees for their willingness to take part in the research and for sharing their knowledge with us.

2 Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. We exclude Cyprus and Malta from this group due to their different historical trajectories.

(see, for instance, Cameron 2003; Lasas 2008; Moravcsik – Vachudová 2003; Schimmelfennig 2001; Vaughan-Whitehead 2003; Zielonka 2003). Our knowledge is, for example, rather limited when it comes to the questions of how these new members are perceived, what their roles are in coalition-building in the enlarged Union, what roles they are assigned and what level of influence they enjoy on an informal level. All these issues are related to the broader question of perceptions of the NMS in the older EU countries and by their representatives.

It is this question of perceptions of the NMS (and particularly of Poland as the most influential new member) that our article aims to explore. We claim that these perceptions are essential in many ways. As one critic has said, ‘It is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers’ beliefs about the world and their images of others’ (Jervis 1976: 28). Perceptions also play a major role in all phases of the process of European integration. The success of policy initiatives often depends on how the countries that came up with them are seen by the Community; the ability to create winning coalitions also clearly correlates with those countries’ standing; and the negotiations themselves are linked to each country’s past record of (un)successful negotiations within EU institutions. Perceptions have already been used as an analytical prism to study the stance of third countries towards the EU (Lucarelli 2014; Mišík 2013) as well as different EU policies (Aggestam 2012; McLean & Gray 2009), elite and public positions on the EU (Bruter 2004; Ilonszki 2009) and the preferences and influence of its members (Copsey – Pomorska 2010). However, intra-EU perceptions, the issue addressed by this contribution, have only been sufficiently analysed in a very limited number of works (Mišík 2014).

The main question that this article asks is how the old member states (OMS) perceive the newcomers and especially Poland as the most visible and largest of these new members. Is Poland seen as a positive example for the others to follow or rather as the embodiment of the difficulties related to Eastern enlargement and the transition to liberal democracy? Is Poland’s position different from that of the other Eastern members? Is the country viewed as a troublemaker, an ordinary EU member state or perhaps a new leader? To answer these questions, the study (1) compares perceptions of Poland with views of the other new members and (2) proposes two sets of criteria for assessing whether a member state is perceived as “a normal player” (the first set) or “a leading country” (the second set). Methodologically, it builds on 24 semi-structured interviews with senior diplomats belonging to the permanent representation of the older member states in Brussels. This input is used to assess the extent to which these two sets of criteria are fulfilled in the Polish case (see Appendix).

This article proceeds as follows: after this introduction, the next part discusses perceptions as a theoretical notion used in international relations and European studies. The third section examines the academic literature on the

new member states and explores the question of whether approaches which look at these countries as a *sui generis* group are still relevant today. This section also introduces the two above-mentioned sets of criteria that a member state must meet in order to be perceived as a normal player or, as the case may be, a leading country. The fourth and fifth sections apply these two sets to the case of Poland, comparing it to the other new members in this respect. The conclusion then summarises the main findings of this study.

## **Perception within International Relations and European Studies**

Since the late 1950s, perception has been utilised as an analytical concept for examining inter-state relations. It has been included in frameworks for foreign policy analysis such as image theory and role theory (see Boulding 1959; Holsti 1970; Harnisch et al. 2011), but it has also been used outside these frameworks (for example, Jervis 1976). In both cases, such studies highlight the influence of subjective factors on states' foreign policies and warn about the impact of misperceptions on relations between states in the international arena. While image theory deals with "external" perceptions and analyses how a state is viewed by other international actors, role theory focuses on "internal" perceptions, examining perceptions of the state's attributes by its own decision makers.

Image theory was employed mainly during the Cold War to analyse the hostile attitudes of the two superpowers (for a review of this literature, see Silverstein 1989). Although the theory proved successful in shedding new light on the different factors influencing images of the enemy (Silverstein – Flamenbaum 1989), it lost popularity after the fall of the Iron Curtain. On the other hand, role theory survived the end of the Cold War and has been widely used to study issues connected to both international relations and European integration (for example, Aggestam 2012; Catalinac 2007; Chafetz 1997; Mišík 2015).

However, in the field of European studies, research on perceptions has developed largely independently of the above-mentioned classical theories of perception with role theory only later beginning to make inroads here as well. The two major directions of this research focus on a) external perceptions of the EU and b) internal dimensions of perceptions (in particular, the perception of the EU by the member states and their citizens).

Regarding the external dimension, the main question here asks how the European Union is perceived by other actors within the international system. The literature has so far come to the conclusion that on a bilateral level, the EU is perceived by third countries as an economically strong but politically weak actor. However, differences exist so far as bilateral and multilateral fora are concerned. On a multilateral level, the EU is seen as a potentially strong player which nevertheless often lacks sufficient skills and resources to become a political leader or agenda-setter (see the review article by Lucarelli 2014). Even

when it does succeed in taking this position, the EU's actions are hampered by internal discord and its inability to follow its own rules (Gupta – van der Grijp 2000; Keukeleire – Bruyninckx 2011). On a bilateral level, the perception of the EU's position is even worse. However, this critique of the EU is somewhat paradoxical. While some studies point to the EU's weak leadership and insufficient resources, others criticise its too strong and asymmetrical bilateral relations with countries in the European neighbourhood – in Eastern Europe and North Africa (cf. Mattlin 2012).

In terms of its substantive focus, the literature on perceptions within the EU can be divided into three groups of works: (1) those dealing with elite and public perceptions of European integration, (2) those analysing the impact of perceptions on member states' preferences and activities within the EU and (3) those studying the influence of perceptions on individual EU policies. All these types of research on perceptions of, and in, the EU are tied to other sub-fields of European studies, such as studies of EU legitimacy, the perceived democratic deficit and Euroscepticism (Kratochvíl et al. 2013). Perceptions play an essential role in all these areas, but the research is usually very fragmented since perceptions of the EU vary fundamentally both across time and different national settings. Thus, it has been argued that public and elite views of the EU may relate to perceived satisfaction with domestic developments (Ilonszki 2009a), the level of trust in other member states (Genna 2009; for a different view, see White 2010) or the perceived legitimacy of the European project (Jones 2009).

What is typical of these studies is the focus on perceptions of the EU, its institutions and its policies. But perceptions can also influence the preferences and goals that member states pursue at EU level. This pertains, in particular, to each country's perceptions of its own strengths and weaknesses and especially concerns states that have not yet been fully socialised within the EU (for research on EU newcomers, see, for example, Böhmelt – Freyburg 2013; Copeland 2012; Haughton 2009; Haughton 2010). Thus, for example, Polish preferences concerning a common EU energy policy are affected by Poland's 'sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia' (Roth 2011: 620) while for the EU's internal energy market, the perceived security of the energy supply plays a role (Pointvogl 2009). Similarly, Nguyen (2008) shows that decision makers who feel secure in their office opt for the long-term benefits stemming from integration despite the short-term costs while those who do not perceive their positions as stable pursue policies more tuned to shifts in public opinion.

Perceptions can also have an impact on member states' activities within the EU. Substantial differences exist among the member states in this area. For example, although EU governments are often seen 'as more or less consensus-minded' at this level (Wallace 2005: 41), Copsey and Pomorska (2010) found that Poland is a special case since there is a rather negative image of Poland in Brussels, which may considerably limit its potential to play a more prominent

role in the Union. The influence of perceptions has also been studied in relation to the EU's common security and foreign policy (Heller 2009), and such studies sometimes build on role theory (Aggestam 2012). Again, the academic literature shows that perceptions of political agents 'crucially co-determine the levels of realised security and insecurity in Europe' (Heller 2009:1) and that the roles which decision makers ascribe to their own states based on their perceived strengths and weaknesses influence their security and foreign policy choices. Other areas of EU studies which have been studied through the lens of perceptions include the common EU fisheries policy (McLean – Gray 2009), enlargement (Sedelmeier 2006) and relations with third countries (Barbé et al. 2009; Browning – Christou 2010).

## **The New Member States: Not a Bloc of Countries**

The two outstanding features which have defined most research on the NMS are (1) a focus on these countries as a unified bloc and (2) an analysis of their junior position in the EU both prior to and after accession. In more general terms, this means that research on the NMS builds on implicit assumptions of their structural *similarity* to one another and their fundamental *difference* from the old EU members (see, for example, Epstein – Jacoby 2014). In many studies, the NMS are attributed a number of common features, which simultaneously set them apart from the old members. Scholars, thus, point to the weakness of post-Communist states (Dimitrova 2010); commonalities in the process of Europeanisation and the low level of compliance with EU legislation (Schmimmelfennig – Sedelmeier 2004; Sedelmeier 2006a; Falkner – Treib 2008); and similarities in their trade exchange with the EU-15 and in other socio-economic indicators (Boeri – Brücker 2000; Maliszewska 2004; Zaghini 2005), etc.

As useful as the early analyses of the NMS might have been a decade ago, almost 10 years after accession, the positions of these countries are substantially different. Some scholars have noted that even before their accession, the NMS were weakened by their 'diverse interests and weak intraregional co-ordination' (Goetz 2005: 254). The same argument is even more pertinent today: put bluntly, the perception of the NMS as one bloc of countries is outdated. While the NMS still share some interests (for instance, concerning structural and cohesion funds), in many areas their preferences are different and at times even contradictory. This pertains to their geographic priorities, which range from the Baltic Sea via Eastern neighbours, to the Balkans; their vastly different views of the future course of the integration process; and the EU policies that they prefer. (For more details on all of these points, see the overview of diverging NMS positions at [www.eu-27watch.org/](http://www.eu-27watch.org/)).

Moreover, the line between older and newer members has become increasingly blurred due to the fact that newer states have finally started to take up

the roles of ordinary member states. Both the formal and informal asymmetries between the old and new members are beginning to disappear (cf. e.g. Caddy 1997; Dimitrova 2002; for a more complex picture, see Hughes et al. 2004). At a formal level, the NMS have started to perform roles in which they both practically and symbolically represent the EU, thus increasing their official status (Copsey – Pomorska 2013; Roth 2011). A typical example is the rotating presidency: of the NMS, Slovenia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Lithuania and Latvia have so far served as presidency countries (see, for example, Pomorska – Vanhoonacker 2012 or Vilpišauskas 2013).

At an informal level, the process is more complicated since it pertains to the complex skein of activities related to lobbying, coalition-building and negotiation processes within EU decision-making (Coperland 2013). Even more than the ties in formal interactions, informal ties are affected by how the NMS are perceived (Mišík 2013). As these perceptions start to evolve in different directions, the perceived unity of the NMS is further eroded. The resulting tendency is one of internal divergence: while some NMS seem to have succeeded in moving away from the position of junior partners to gradually become ‘normal players’ (Lippert – Umbach 2005) or even ‘reliable partners’ (Karolewski – Sus 2011), others retain lesser positions, which are open to the ‘coercive routes of influence’ exerted by old members (Grabbe 2002; cf. also Goetz 2005).

The main problem lies in the impossibility of replacing the model of the NMS as countries asymmetrically dependent on the old EU-15 with a new and equally simple model. What is instead needed at this point is a more differentiated analysis of the NMS and their roles in the EU. Instead of concentrating on the *similarity* among the NMS and the *difference* between them and the old members, it is high time now to reverse the strategy and look into the growing similarities between the old and the new members and the differences among the NMS. While a few studies have already taken this approach (Taggart – Szczerbiak 2002; Goetz 2005), they have explored the diverse interests of the NMS and their domestic politics, and none have linked this research to the study of perceptions as we do in our analysis.

In order to explore the perceived growing differences among the NMS and their increasing similarities with old members, we focus on the case of Poland. In fact, even prior to accession, Poland was the only NMS to receive sustained academic attention (Bielasiak 2002; Blazyca et al. 1999; Ferry 2003; Hughes – Bucknall 2000; Preston – Michonski 1999) and was probably the best analysed country among the newcomers (see, for example, Copsey – Houghton 2009; Copsey – Pomorska 2010, 2013; Lackowska-Madurowicz – Swianiewicz 2013; Roth 2011; Vandecasteele 2013). While this focus may be explained simply by pointing to Poland’s size and strategic location, we argue that perceptions of the country are of at least equal importance. Though the country’s size remains the same, its (perceived) status may change fundamentally – for example, it may



shift from that of an inexperienced newcomer to a “normal” member state or even a regional leader. In our study, we present five criteria which define this transition. The two criteria for the acceptance of a country as a normal player are:

1. its ability to comply with basic norms of behaviour both in domestic politics and in the EU; and
2. its ability to take part in EU decision-making in ways seen as acceptable by others.

The first of these two conditions concerns general compliance with the EU’s fundamental democratic values and domestic constitutional principles. This is a basic prerequisite for even tentatively considering any state as a normal player. If a country or its politicians are judged to violate these principles (as was the case to some extent with Austria’s Haider controversy), its acceptance as a normal player is ruled out. However, this condition is not sufficient. For the country to be fully accepted as a normal player, its representatives must also be able to comply with the informal rules on decision-making procedures at EU level. There are various soft rules which a “trouble-making” member may violate: it may, for example, try to block the Union’s decision on a sensitive issue, refuse to accept a compromise solution or fail repeatedly to uphold commitments made in the past, etc. Hence, the country’s compliance with the fundamental values and informal EU rules is an essential test of its “normality.”

To become one of the leading countries, the country must be perceived as fulfilling three additional criteria:

- a) the ability to find a specialised and important policy niche in the EU;
- b) the ability to create winning coalitions for the purpose of EU decision-making; and
- c) occasional willingness to participate in EU activities which may be seen as unprofitable in terms of narrowly defined national interests.

First, the country must be capable of becoming an expert in some policy area(s), and this expertise has to be accepted by other member states. For example, Sweden may be recognised as an expert on environmental issues and transparency and France is acknowledged as a leader in the Mediterranean region and in the cooperation with North Africa, etc. Secondly, a leading country must have major coalition potential and a track record of creating and sustaining sufficiently strong alliances in support of a common cause. What matters here is not so much the size of the country but rather its diplomatic resources and its ability to convince others to follow its lead. Finally, a leading country must be willing from time to time to sacrifice its narrowly defined national interests in favour of the whole Community. At very minimum, it must be capable of convincing others that the preferred strategy will primarily benefit the EU and the advantages for the country in question are of secondary importance.

The following analysis is based on the semi-structured expert interviews conducted with the respondents who were part of the permanent representation

of the old member states in Brussels. Altogether 24 face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior officials and diplomats who were asked to describe their attitudes towards Poland (and also the NMS in general) based on their personal experience. These officials are in day-to-day contact with the representatives of the NMS at different levels (mostly within Working Groups of the EU Council, but also within COREPER), and thus, they are familiar with the new member states' activities and behaviour during decision-making at EU level. We tried to get a full picture about Poland and therefore interviewed OMS representatives from different levels of decision-making as well as from different countries. We expected that representatives from various member countries would perceive Poland in different ways and therefore our aim was to interview as many representatives as possible. In some cases, we managed to speak with multiple officials and diplomats from the permanent representation, while in one case (Spain) we did not succeed in interviewing anyone at all. Since the interviews were conducted in 2010, the research reflects the perceptions of the representatives of the OMS after Poland had been an EU member for six years. The interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes and were recorded. This study is based on their verbatim transcripts.

## Poland as a Normal Player

Our model sets two conditions that a member state must meet in order to be perceived by other members as a normal player, i.e. as an ordinary member country that is able to fulfil its commitments at EU level and is a suitable candidate for cooperation within a coalition. A normal player must be able to comply with basic norms of behaviour both in domestic politics and in the EU, and it must be able to take part in EU decision-making in ways seen as acceptable by others. These conditions are also the prerequisites for any member state aspiring to the status of a leading country. This is why we first analyse perceptions of Poland vis-a-vis these basic conditions and only then proceed to the second set of requirements (i.e. those related to the leadership status).

None of the respondents identified any problems regarding Poland and the basic standards of liberal democracy; the rule of law in the country is generally seen as guaranteed. In fact, several respondents pointed to the fact that the NMS, including Poland, are 'very conscious about the values...of democracy and liberty' (Interview 17) and some went as far as to claim that no 'political wall' existed between the OMS and the NMS in this area (Interview 9).<sup>3</sup> The similarity of the old and newer members was also stressed when it came to domestic political crises: the respondents believed that these problems did not affect the

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<sup>3</sup> We would note that the interviews were conducted prior to the current problems with meeting democratic standards in Hungary.



general level of democracy and that in any case they were common among older members (Interview 1).

If a distinction was to be made, it was not so much between the old and the new member states, but rather between the two waves of Eastern enlargement. Problems with organised crime and corruption in Romania and Bulgaria were mentioned repeatedly (for example, in Interviews 17 and 24). The establishment of the Mechanism for Cooperation and Verification following Romania and Bulgaria's failure to implement their accession commitments in this area, was also cited as evidence of the fact that these two countries lagged behind the 2004 entrants (for example, in Interviews 17, 18, 21 and 22). As a French respondent noted critically, the 'political systems [of these countries] have great difficulty [in adapting] to EU standards' (Interview 1).

In spite of the palpable differences between the two groups of NMS, many respondents still described these countries as a bloc. Typically, the general conclusion was that the NMS's economic transition was relatively quick, but that the transition was 'even quicker from the political and institutional point of view' (Interview 7). As a result of this successful transformation, the NMS had been 'consolidated and they work quite well' (Interview 7). The consolidation, however, also translated into a growing similarity between these countries and the older members – as one respondent put it, 'there are very few traces of the political transition' (Interview 22). The only important difference indicated was the prioritising by the NMS of EU topics related to their past experience or geographical location – as seen, for example, in the stress on human rights and the interest in greater ties with the Union's Eastern neighbours (Interview 10).

To summarise our findings concerning the first criterion, Poland was perceived as a well-functioning democracy fully capable of complying with expected norms of behaviour.

The second criterion concerns Poland's ability to take part in the EU decision-making process in ways that are seen as acceptable by others. While our respondents did not perceive any problems in regard to the quality of Polish democracy, the picture was not so clear when it came to the second criterion. The most visible taint on Poland's image was its assertive approach to negotiations. Our interviews confirmed that Polish diplomats were perceived as substantially more assertive than the representatives of the other NMS (Interview 20). Although Poland was not seen as the only active newcomer, and it was noted that diplomats from the other NMS also tried to defend their 'specific national interests' (Interview 4), the other NMS were described as more constrained and sometimes even having problems in 'advancing their positions' (Interview 4).

In other words, regarding this issue, the respondents gave strikingly different answers when speaking about the NMS as a bloc than they did when talking about Poland. Commenting on the NMS as a group, one interviewed official claimed that 'it's still true for some new members that they don't feel they have

a say' (Interview 1) and that as a result most newcomers were silent during negotiations (see also, for example, Interviews 2, 4 and 16). Another respondent confirmed this view, arguing that 'the representatives of the new member states are less likely to play a prominent role in the general debate (where there isn't a very particular national interest involved) than older member states of comparable size' (Interview 2).

However, the skills of NMS diplomats were seen to be quickly improving. The NMS invest much effort in their administrative capacities. In the working groups, in particular, they were said to be represented by 'the best of the best' (Interview 3); diplomats had 'adapted very rapidly to the working methods in the European Union' (Interview 17) and their negotiation capacities were generally perceived as fast increasing. A persistent problem, however, was the rigid instructions being dispatched from national capitals, which meant that the newcomers had 'very little room for manoeuvre [in negotiations]' (Interview 13). But even in this respect, the NMS representatives were developing flexibility. In particular, the experience with the EU presidency was credited for its role in accelerating the learning process and facilitating an 'understanding of how business is really concluded' (Interview 16). Consequently, NMS like the Czech Republic and Slovenia which had already undertaken the presidency were 'clearly more confident' (Interview 16).

Poland's activities – and especially the impact of those activities – were seen as substantially different from the picture for the rest of the newcomers. However, this was not only explained by the simple fact that Poland was 'the biggest player among the new member states' (Interview 8). Instead, the country's special role was often attributed to the perceived special mission of Poland in Europe. Polish diplomats were seen as being 'very conscious about their historical position in Europe' (Interview 8), which translated into greater assertiveness among the country's representatives. Frankly put, Poland was 'making a lot of noise' (Interview 21) since it saw itself as 'the big exception' – as a country destined to play a special role in Europe – and as 'a big player' (Interview 8). Many of our respondents noted that Poland often failed to strive 'towards common goals' (Interview 4). In relation to Russia especially, Poland had proven to be rather stubborn and unwilling to find a compromise solution. Informed by grievances against Russia on issues ranging from Communist war crimes to meat exports to Russia, Poland's approach was characterised by one interviewee as 'quite heavy-handed', hard-chasing' (Interview 4).

As a result, it is not so easy to answer the key question about compliance with informal EU rules in the Polish case. Whether or not Poland's behaviour was acceptable very much depended on the country's perceived importance. When Poland was seen as a big member state, the prevailing view was that its approach was to be expected. As our interviewees observed, Poland 'obviously, and rightly, sees itself as a large country' (Interview 2); it was 'the biggest player among the

new member states' (Interview 8) and thus, allowed to bend the common rules from time to time. Paradoxically, Poland's assertiveness and straightforward promotion of its own interests were actually perceived as proof of its preeminent position since such a strategy was also typical for large older member states (see, for instance, Interview 21). Perhaps not surprisingly, such behaviour seemed to be more acceptable to the respondents from big member states (Interview 1). Respondents from the smaller member states claimed, in contrast, that Poland should be 'more accommodating and more diplomatic' since the heavy-handed approach was not in line with 'the European way' (Interview 21).

To sum up the analysis, the assessment of Poland's activities was deeply ambivalent on this point. This was more evident here than in any other area since the country's actions provoked different reactions from different older member states. Nevertheless, it is certainly not the case that Poland is generally perceived today as a troublemaker. While it remains highly forceful in its negotiation style, the country has earned the trust of the other member states, and its views are increasingly respected. Poland may also have benefited from the fact that attention has shifted to other NMS – most notably Bulgaria and Romania – which are seen as problematic member states that fail to comply with both formal and informal EU rules (Interview 18).

## **Poland as a Leading Country**

As we have shown above, three criteria must be fulfilled for a country to be considered one of the leading EU states. These are the establishment of 1) a policy niche where the country is acknowledged as an expert/leader, 2) its ability to create winning coalitions and 3) its willingness to prioritise the EU's interests over its own at crucial junctures.

Poland has been very successful as far as the policy-niche criterion is concerned. The country's focus on its Eastern neighbours (the Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy, and Russia) is well-noted by the other member states. The Polish initiative leading to the establishment of the Eastern Partnership has only confirmed the special position of Poland regarding Eastern Europe. One of our respondents aptly summarised this argument – which was repeated by many others – by referring to Poland's 'very intense interest' in Russia and Eastern Europe in general (Interview 2). At the same time, however, Poland's activities in the East were sometimes seen as too driven by the bilateral issues between itself and Russia; some respondents labelled this situation 'a problem' (Interview 8 and see above), and others were even blunter and more critical of Poland's concentration on Russia (Interview 17). Still, the Polish focus on select issues and its stable position on these topics made the country highly predictable. Even if Poland was sometimes very assertive in promoting its interests in this region, such a role was perceived as better than

being 'a loose cannon,' i.e. a member state whose position is unclear and which changes its stance very quickly (Interview 13).

As far as Poland's coalition-building was concerned, the country was seen as the most influential new member state though it had not yet shown 'its full potential' (Interview 24). Although none of the new members had gained the respect that the large older member states enjoy, Poland was 'visibly more resourced than some of the others' (Interview 11); its potential was comparable to that of some less influential but still important older members (such as Spain). This was further corroborated by the fact that Poland was often mentioned, surprisingly together with Hungary (Interviews 10, 13 and 16), as a country which had become not just 'better able to define what it wants' but also '[able] to persuade the Community to reflect that' (Interview 10).

The main paradox here lies in the fact that while Polish diplomats may claim the country's role in the EU derives from its size and its historical role in Europe, in the eyes of our respondents, what mattered was neither Poland's size nor its historical merits. Instead, what counted were the newly-gained diplomatic skills and thorough preparations of Polish diplomats, who often informally consulted their colleagues from the more experienced member states (Interview 13); this allowed them to become more successful players in the EU political arena (cf. Interview 16). It was this diplomatic experience of Poland which translated into the country's greater coalition potential. Here, Poland emerged as not only the natural leader of the NMS, but a more attractive coalition partner for the old member states as well (Interview 10).

While the image of Poland as one of the main engines of the EU's Eastern Policy was, thus, firmly established and its coalition potential seen as quickly increasing, the picture was far more mixed when it came to the last criterion. Poland was still perceived as a country that focused on its own interests while remaining unwilling to look at those of the EU, not to mention those of the international community as a whole. As one interviewee put it euphemistically, Poland's behaviour – unlike that of other EU member states – was 'very direct' (Interview 17). In connection with the country's focus on its national interests, a frequently mentioned area was EU environmental policy. While the new member states were generally seen as less environmentally aware than the older EU members (Interview 10), Poland was often singled out as particularly indifferent to environmental issues; the fight against climate change was said to be outright ignored or even hampered by the country's diplomacy (Interviews 10, 17 and 20). While this does not mean that Poland was viewed as a major troublemaker in this area, the Polish stance certainly made it far more complicated to reach consensus within the EU on these issues (Interview 17). The problem here was that Poland's stance was not taken to be one of many diverse positions of the different EU member states, but seen as a unique deviation from the positions of the other members (Interview 20).

## Conclusion

Our analysis has attempted to show the success of Poland in overcoming stereotypes about the unreliability of the NMS and establishing itself as a normal EU player, which is in most respects fully comparable with the older members. The results of this study indicate that Poland complies with fundamental democratic principles and constitutional rules, and none of our respondents noticed substantial shortcomings in this area. The difference between Poland, on the one hand, and Romania and Bulgaria, on the other, was seen to be greater than the one between Poland and the older members. Our analysis suggests that Poland has some deficiencies when it comes to the ability to comply with the informal rules of EU decision-making. Its self-asserting approach to negotiations was not always well-received among the other members although most respondents saw this assertiveness as normal for a big player. According to the respondents from smaller member states, however, Poland could be far more successful in pursuing its goals if it followed the unofficial “rules of the game” more closely and approached problems from a less narrow perspective. The results of Poland’s behaviour were rather ambivalent: the country was seen to be investing a lot in its areas of interest, but at the same time its approach was quite heavy-handed. Nevertheless, our respondents noted that Poland’s learning curve seemed to be steep and it was gradually adapting to the EU’s preferred style of negotiations. All in all, this analysis indicates that Poland is perceived as a normal player within the EU by the representatives of the OMS.

We contend that Poland has moved to the position of frontrunner among the NMS, and it has the greatest potential to become the regional leader. For our interviewees, the country’s leadership status was, however, not directly related to its size but to its diplomatic skills and increased familiarity with the informal workings of the EU. Poland has quickly succeeded in finding a specific policy niche where it is taken seriously by new and old EU member states alike: on all issues concerning the Eastern Partnership, related areas of the European Neighbourhood Policy and the EU’s relations with Russia, the Polish position is of great importance for the EU’s final decisions. Admittedly, Poland has seen slightly less success in terms of its coalition potential. But even here, the country is slowly becoming a more acceptable partner for the older member states; its ability to create coalitions is especially high when East European issues are at stake. Poland’s greatest weakness is its strong focus on the straightforward promotion of its interests. According to our respondents, situations in which Poland credibly combined its interests with the promotion of EU interests were rather rare; Poland was seen as a country that was exceedingly blunt in its policies. Hence, to sum up this study’s main finding: although Poland has been relatively successful in fulfilling the first two criteria, its failure on the third criterion has so far precluded it from becoming a full-fledged leading country in the EU.

Future research should focus on developing the proposed analytical framework and on analysing the period after 2010, i.e. the date when the current research was conducted. The perception of not only Poland but also other member states that joined the EU after 2004 may change rapidly due to changes in their behaviour and activities at EU level. The current study is limited by the empirical research conducted in 2010, and future analysis should build on its results while providing a comparative perspective with the following period.

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## Appendix: List of the interviews

- Interview 1: Diplomat, Permanent representation of France to the EU, Brussels, 11 May 2010
- Interview 2: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Ireland to the EU, Brussels, 11 May 2010
- Interview 3: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Belgium to the EU, Brussels, 11 May 2010
- Interview 4: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Ireland to the EU, Brussels, 11 May 2010
- Interview 5: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Italy to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 6: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Italy to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 7: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Italy to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 8: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Ireland to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 9: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Greece to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010
- Interview 10: Diplomat, Permanent representation of the United Kingdom to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010
- Interview 11: Diplomat, Permanent representation of the United Kingdom to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010
- Interview 12: Diplomat, Permanent representation of France to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010
- Interview 13: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Belgium to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010
- Interview 14: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Portugal to the EU, Brussels, 23 June 2010
- Interview 15: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Portugal to the EU, Brussels, 23 June 2010
- Interview 16: Diplomat, Permanent representation of the United Kingdom to the EU, Brussels, 23 June 2010
- Interview 17: Diplomat, Permanent representation of the Netherlands to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 18: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Luxembourg to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010
- Interview 19: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Luxembourg to the EU, Brussels, 12 May 2010

Interview 20: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Germany to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010  
Interview 21: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Denmark to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010  
Interview 22: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Austria to the EU, Brussels, 23 June 2010  
Interview 23: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Finland to the EU, Brussels, 23 June 2010  
Interview 24: Diplomat, Permanent representation of Sweden to the EU, Brussels, 22 June 2010

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