

Krzysztof Skubiszewski and the Making of Contemporary Polish Foreign Policy: An Interview with Nick Cohen (MA 2021)

What is the topic of your thesis?

My thesis is a re-examination of Polish foreign policy towards Ukraine post-1990. I do this through an intellectual biography of Poland's first post-socialist foreign minister, Krzysztof Skubiszewski.

Why were you interested in exploring this topic?

In the Spring of 2019, before I had started at Columbia but after I had accepted the offer to study at the European Institute, I was offered a position to join the Cold War Archives Research Fellowship program. I went to the University of Arkansas to do research on this fellowship, which was the first time I had ever done archival research. I generally knew that I was interested in Poland and in the post-World War II years but had not yet narrowed down my research topic. I went into the archive and came across a document that mentions Krzysztof Skubiszewski's name and thought to myself, "I remember him." I had come across him several years prior in an incredible book which was foundational to my research, Timothy Snyder's *The Reconstruction of Nations*. In this book, there is one chapter where Skubiszewski is mentioned. I remember at the time that I was reading it, I circled his name and wrote in the margin, "Someone should really write a biography about him," shortly thereafter forgetting this note. Later in Arkansas, I saw his name as part of the very first cohort in an international educational exchange program with the Soviet bloc that the State Department was putting together, with funding and support from the Ford Foundation. I knew then that I had to write about him. Initially, I wanted to write a history of the entire exchange program, but I quickly realized that this was too large of a project for a Master's thesis. My project then morphed into writing an intellectual biography of Skubiszewski, a figure with little serious scholarly investigation despite his outsized contribution to Polish history. I realized that this was also quite ambitious, so I narrowed it even further to exploring why Poland and Ukraine developed such strong, positive, collaborative relations in the 1990s. This is quite puzzling, as we could have expected Poland and Ukraine to have rather antagonistic relations given their long history of mutual antipathy. I was driven by two primary questions: What explains the positive relationship between Poland and Ukraine in the early 1990s? Could Skubiszewski's biography and his experience shed any light on this relationship that challenges or extends the prevailing literature?

How did you conduct your research?

I kicked off my entire program with this research trip to Arkansas, collecting many documents from this experience. I read the secondary literature, trying to find the archival collections that

would have materials related to what I was interested in. Simultaneously, I connected with people who could either point me in the right direction of different archives to go to or different resources to mine, as well as people whom I could interview to get some first-person accounts of what actually happened. During the first year of my program, from 2019-2020, before the pandemic started, I was able to go to the Rockefeller Archive Center to look at some Ford Foundation papers. I was also able to go to the archives of Harvard Law School, where Skubiszewski studied in the late 1950s. While I was doing research at Harvard, I connected with a Polish scholar who told me that Skubiszewski's personal records are stored at the Instytut Zachodni (Western Institute), in Poznań, Poland. I had a trip scheduled to go there, but then the pandemic hit and I was not able to go. Fortunately, I was able to liaise with the archivists there to conduct remote research. My thesis relies primarily on records from the Instytut Zachodni, which I analyzed in the context of the secondary literature on the subject.

What are your main findings?

I wanted to examine the impact that Skubiszewski's training in the United States had on the way that he thought about international political issues and the way that he framed Polish foreign policy when he became Foreign Minister. In particular, I was interested in understanding the impact of his training in International Law in the United States as an exchange student at Harvard and a visiting professor at Columbia. My operating hypothesis was that his training at Harvard, his experience at Columbia, and his exposure to Western international legal theory were all extremely influential in the way that he approached international political questions. I argue that these experiences steeped him in the American tradition of legal universalism. Legal universalism, the oldest of three distinct American strands of international legal theory, posits a fundamental connection between legal systems and morality. It contends that law holds normative value both in its letter and its principle. Derived from earlier conceptions of natural law, it is comprised of three key tenets: the primacy of individual human rights, belief in the normative value inherent to the international legal process, and the conception that international law leads directly to international peace.

I argue in my thesis that Skubiszewski uniquely brought a legal universalist perspective to his work as Foreign Minister. This is distinct from the prevailing theory of 1990s Polish foreign policy, namely "romanticism." Romanticism argues that in order to balance against an aggressive Russia, it is important to build up a powerful and independent Eastern European corridor, and the means through which to do so is by emphasizing a common heritage, shared cultural history, shared linguistic history, and to build up an idea of brotherhood and fraternity.

What I find in my thesis is that, first, Skubiszewski was indeed a legal universalist; the way that he wrote about international law and the way that he thought about international issues was all presented and understood through this lens of legal universalism. Second, he brought this

perspective to his work as Foreign Minister, at least in so far as it related to Poland's relationship with Ukraine. The implication of this from a historical perspective is to change, challenge, and add complexity to the way in which we understand Poland's foreign policy in the 1990s. It was not solely driven by the romantic approach – although to be sure the romantic approach was extremely influential and my thesis is not meant to reject that paradigm entirely.

An important implication from my findings is that Skubiszewski, with his legal universalist approach, was uniquely able to bridge the divide between East and West. One of the interesting historical questions of this period is why Poland emerged in the 1990s as the primary East-West interlocutor. Even now, Poland is one of the most, if not *the* most, important voices in European and transatlantic politics when it comes to speaking on behalf of Eastern Europe. A key reason for this is that Skubiszewski knew not only how to talk the talk but how to walk the walk in terms of the way that Western international relations were and are conducted. At the same time, he understood the position of Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, and other Eastern European states. Skubiszewski could thus make himself understood in the West in ways that other Eastern European statesmen in the early post-socialist years could not. He was able to be that bridge because of his unique training and belief in legal universalism.

What makes this issue relevant today?

On the one hand, I think it is important as an addition to the historiography of Polish foreign policy and of Central European history in the critically important years of the early 1990s. On the other hand, it sheds some light on contemporary Polish foreign policy. It is actually this legal universalist approach that has driven Polish-Ukrainian relations for the last thirty years, not a romantic approach. This is important because it changes the way that we look at how Polish-Ukrainian relations have developed, and it also changes the way that we should understand and evaluate Polish foreign policy today, particularly as it relates to Ukraine. This is even more important in the context of the Law and Justice (PiS) government, which is an intensely nationalist government, blatantly at odds with the European Union. Even so, I think there is something that should suggest that Poland is not interested in completely rejecting its partnership within the transatlantic community. It is not interested in becoming an exclusivist, nationalist polity. It is interested in creating a stable and safe environment, doing it largely within the boundaries of normative Western politics (although this certainly is changing as time goes on with this current government).

I think my thesis can change the way in which we analyze Polish foreign policy. It is not purely nationalistic. There is a strong universalist undercurrent and we can see that coming through very clearly, even with the PiS government's relationship with Ukraine. In fact, there is really only one example of when Poland enacted a nationalist reversion to a romantic foreign policy since Skubiszewski's tenure as foreign minister. In 2015, there was a certain romantic flavor to the PiS

government's new foreign policy which led to a rejection of collaboration between Poland and Ukraine, a resurgence of ethnonationalist claims over territory, and an intense problem concerning the restitution of mass graves relating to the ethnic cleansing that both Poles and Ukrainians committed during World War II. For three years, this nationalist approach to Polish foreign policy completely destroyed the working relationship between Poland and Ukraine. What is interesting to note is that it took a return to a legal universalist and incrementalist approach to Polish-Ukrainian relations to fix that. By the end of 2017, the PiS government abandoned its aggressive nationalist rhetoric as it related to Ukraine and reverted to a more concrete, collaborative alliance predicated on the legal universalist ideas of normative and strategic relations. Now, Poland is one of Ukraine's staunchest supporters. The two countries, despite what we would expect, continue to be incredibly collaborative and I think this is a legacy of Skubiszewski's approach.