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Poland: Warily Westward

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History has not been kind to Poland. Having suffered horrific abuse in Europe's past upheavals, the Poles are understandably wary of their neighbor's advances. At the same time, Poland is eager to regain international prestige and share in the West's prosperity. Hence, its ambivalence about entering the European Union. Still recovering from decades of Soviet domination, Poland approaches its future in the EU with a mixture of trepidation and hope.

The most vivid expression of that hope came in a referendum last June when 77 percent of Poles voted in favor of EU membership. The turnout (59 percent) was relatively low by western European standards. But it provided badly needed confirmation of Poland's willingness to take the European plunge. Until then it was far from clear whether the government's pro-EU policy would win popular validation.

While Poles apparently are convinced that EU membership will pay off in the long term, skepticism runs deep. The outgoing government of Prime Minister Leszek Miller sought unsuccessfully to secure strong voting rights for Poland within the EU. His failure bolstered support for the anti-European peasants' party Samoobrona (Self-defense). By the end of March, opinion surveys showed Samoobrona had become the country's second most popular political force.

Although Poland's business community is largely pro-European, the country's huge agricultural sector is openly hostile to the EU. Small farmers, who represent a quarter of the country's population, are worried about imports from the deep-pocketed west. Most lack the capital to modernize production and meet EU health and safe regulations. They are thus effectively denied access to European export markets. Exposed to greater competition, many Polish farms will not survive.

With nearly 40 million people, Poland is by far the biggest of the EU's ten new member states. It's also among the poorest, easily qualifying for EU structural funds. These funds can provide development opportunities and help ease the pain of regulatory convergence. But their impact will be limited. Far more can be gained through foreign direct investment.

Unfortunately, Polish efforts to attract FDI are diminishing. The EU's 2003 enlargement report describes the pace of privatization in Poland as "disappointing". More damning still, the report concludes that the "reform path has nearly come to a halt." For Poland, clearing the EU membership hurdle was just the beginning. It must now find the strength to complete the course of integration.