

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

Poland's conception of European security and Russia

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Russian Federation
Poland
Polish-Russian relations

ABSTRACT

This article examines the problem of contemporary bilateral relations between Poland and Russia. Its thesis largely attributes the rivalry of these two states in Eastern Europe to conceptions relating to the balancing and bandwagoning of power. This rivalry can be put down to the fact that Polish-Russian relations are being developed within broader global processes such as Russia's relations with NATO, the USA and European Union. The greatest obstacle to the maintenance of mutually beneficial relations is the sensitive issue of security. In recent years Poland has consistently underlined its willingness to reinforce NATO's mutual defense mechanisms by supporting the organization's continued presence in Central-Eastern Europe. This issue has been compounded by Poland's striving to bring the countries of Eastern Europe (especially Ukraine) into closer affiliation with Western institutions favoring European integration, which is evidently perceived as interference in what is regarded by Moscow to be a sphere of Russian influence. This has provoked a number of serious crises in bilateral relations between Poland and Russia since the Euro-Maidan Revolution in Ukraine. Russian plans to install new (Iskander) missile systems close to the Polish border and Poland's effective attempts post-2014 to extend NATO presence within its own country testify to the scale of conflicts of interest between the two states and the lack of trust afforded by both sides. The issues highlighted in this paper are of great importance, since they not only enable the complexity of Central European issues to be more fully comprehended but also help to elucidate other global actors' conceptions relating to cooperation with Europe.

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1. Introduction

The aim of the article is to determine the fundamental conflicts of interest between Poland and Russia growing out of Moscow's vision of the European order, which is perceived by Warsaw to be a threat to its own interests. In the present article, the author refers to documents, statements and analyses devoted to Russian foreign policy issued or published during the first two tenures of Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000–2008), Dmitry Medvedev's intervening presidency and Putin's recent presidential term (2012–2018).

The thesis, which the author presents at the beginning of the article, posits that a large proportion of the problems that have occurred within the sphere of Russian-Polish bilateral relations have arisen from a clash between these states' differing visions of the European order. The roots of these visions can be traced back both to the perpetual rivalry in Central and Eastern Europe between Poland and Russia and the age-old dispute over who should lead the Slavic nations. This thesis is elaborated

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.04.001>

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Please cite this article in press as: Lisiakiewicz, R., Poland's conception of European security and Russia, *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.postcomstud.2018.04.001>

from the Russian point of view by, for example, Aleksandr [Shirokorad \(2007\)](#). It should be added that due to the differing potentials of these two countries and a clear asymmetry in the perception of their mutual role in international relations, it is not bilateral issues that have traditionally formed the crux of Polish-Russian relations, but rather both countries' engagement in the international arena and their attitude to the USA, NATO, European Union, and/or CIS. Agnieszka Bryc, of the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Poland, emphasizes that geopolitical burdens in Russia and Poland that have permanently affected the national characters of both countries markedly antagonize their bilateral relations ([Bryc, 2012: 42–43](#)).

The aforementioned thesis explicating the rivalry between Poland and Russia in Eastern Europe is inextricably linked to conceptions relating to the balancing and bandwagoning of power. Poland joined the Western alliances to bandwagon with stronger countries, yet Poland has also attempted to employ the contrasting balancing strategy of allying with weaker states from the regions aimed against Russian influence ([Walt, 1987: 112](#)). Poland attempts to use this mechanism to strengthen its position with regard to Russia in the international arena. Consequently, Poland's NATO and European Union membership and strategic partnership with the United States are of key importance for Polish security policy. According to the bandwagoning theory, Poland is attempting to use such alliances as the one with NATO, because it has no other means of countering potential threats from Russia ([Schimmelfennig, 2003: 29](#)). Poland carefully exploits its EU and NATO membership and the capacity and potential of these two institutions, using them to implement such Polish goals as bringing the countries of Eastern Europe closer to the West, for example, through the Eastern Partnership Program ([Włodkowska-Bagan, 2012: 52](#)). When it comes to the geopolitical dimension of Poland's strategy, relations with the USA are especially important. We can compare this strategy to the process of choosing an influential patron. In an alliance of this nature the Polish position is extremely weak and creates problems for how Polish policy is perceived within the European Union ([Grosse, 2016: 120, 123–124](#)). Warsaw also demonstrates a willingness to use some elements of a balancing strategy, particularly the seeking of partners for cooperation against Russian influence among countries from Central and Eastern Europe ([Schweller, 1994: 74](#)). This policy is somewhat of an anomaly in geopolitical terms, but can be explained by the nature of the relations between the Polish state and its society and Poland's special attitude towards the Russian state ([Schimmelfennig, 2003: 77](#)).

2. Poland's perspective: history, institutions, and geopolitics

The fraught relations between Poland and Russia have a long historical tradition. There is not enough space here to describe all these historical complexities, but it needs to be stressed that despite their common Slavic roots, Poland and Russia have developed in totally different civilizational conditions. Poland was quick to choose the European/Western type of state organization and, along with it, Catholic Christianity. However, Russia accepted Christianity from Byzantium and, at the same time, the eastern model of a power system. As a consequence, from the very beginning, these two countries started to develop according to different models of civilization. From the end of the 14th century, when Poland entered into union with Lithuania, competition between Poland and Russia for influence in Eastern Europe clearly already existed. The 16th and 17th centuries were marked by recurrent wars between the Tsardom of Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, mainly fought over which state should control Ukrainian territory. In the 18th century Poland fell under Russian control, before finally collapsing at the end of the same century. However, the most serious historical controversies affecting Polish-Russian relations were provoked by events that occurred in the 20th century. This is clear to see from the huge differences between Polish and Russian interpretations of the causes of World War II. While the Polish side underlines Russia's cooperation with Hitler, the signing of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and, ultimately, coordinated with Fascist Germany assault on Poland, the Russian side draws attention to their desire to protect the Russophone population in the eastern parts of Poland and the self-defensive character of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact. These grave historical disputes continue to influence relations between the two states. Politicians from both Poland and Russia readily turn to these historical analogies to describe contemporary political processes in the rival state. For example, during the 2009 anniversary of the outbreak of World War II (WWII), Polish President Lech Kaczyński suggested that Russia under Putin was starting to behave like Fascist Germany ([Westerplatte ..., 2009](#)). Vladimir Putin retorted by claiming that some countries (like Poland) had attempted to forget some uncomfortable facts from their own history ([Putin ..., 2009](#)). Putin also reminded the audience that empires (like Russia) cannot be humiliated ([Ostre przemówienie ..., 2009](#)).

The historical past also continues to influence contemporary Polish and Russian conceptions of the European order, especially when it comes to the role of the Central and East European region. Polish notions of regional integration have historical roots, alluding to the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, which incorporated the Baltic States, Belarus and Ukraine as well as Moldova. Some regions of these countries also formed part of the new Polish State built in 1918. After WWII, Polish thinkers created the idea of a Polish policy toward the East which was in competition with contemporary Russian ideas favoring regional cooperation. The idea behind the Polish Eastern Policy was generally based on a construct created by Jerzy Giedroyc (a Polish writer and political activist) after WWII in which the issue of Polish-Russian relations played a key role ([Pomianowski, 2004: 27](#)). Russia itself was also at the core of this idea. According to Giedroyc, Russia, unlike western countries, had not experienced a stage of development marked by decolonization and had not desisted from treating territorial acquisitions as a source of development. Giedroyc believed that the only way Poland could defend itself against incursions of Russian power was by ensuring the independence of the countries located between Poland and Russia. Giedroyc's project placed particular emphasis on the need to build permanent, friendly and equal relations between Poland and Lithuania, Belarus, and first and foremost Ukraine, turning them all into Polish allies. This was supposed to form a natural part of, and be a condition for, making solid, resilient improvements in Polish-Russian relations—the project's ultimate aim

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