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POLISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AFTER 10 APRIL 2010

Daria Janke

Institute of Political Sciences, University of Gdansk, Bażyńskiego 4, 80-309 Gdańsk, Poland,
e-mail: d.janke1904@gmail.com

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Abstract

Polish-Russian relations are an extremely dynamic and changeable phenomenon, especially after Poland's accession to NATO. Despite the fact that the Russian Federation was established only in 1991, the relations discussed in this article have also been influenced by the relations between Poland and the Soviet Union, whose successor was Russia. The aim of this study is to analyse changes in the Polish-Russian relations after 2010. Not only does the paper present the causes of conflicts that have influenced mutual relations, but it also indicates areas that need changing and that may contribute to the warming of relations between Warsaw and Moscow. The method of comparative analysis was applied in the study. The conducted analysis allows stating a significant impact of the Smolensk disaster on the Polish-Russian relations.

Key words

foreign policy, historical policy, Poland, Polish-Russian relations, Russia, Smolensk disaster.

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1. Introduction

The specificity and volatility of the Polish-Russian relations at the beginning of the 21st c. were undoubtedly influenced by resentments and divergences in the interpretation of history from previous decades, and even centuries, shared by Poland and Russia. The Katyn massacre, which is also one of the most tragic chapters in the Polish-Soviet history, is an especially frequent event in the Polish narrative. The Polish side sought to end the Katyn investigation, concluded by recognizing Poles as a nation repressed by the USSR, as well as by compensating Polish victims of repression. Russia did not respond to these demands and considered

the opening of Polish cemeteries in Katyn and Mednoye in 2000 as the end of historical disputes (Wasziuta, 2009).

Overall, in the first decade of the 21st c. Polish-Russian relations were quite cold. The functioning of Poland in the structures of NATO, the EU and the Eastern Partnership was criticized by Russia and perceived as directed against it. Warsaw, however, opposed the plan for and then the construction of the northern gas pipeline. An embargo imposed by Russia on Polish food products, which lasted for 2 years, was also an important event that cast a shadow over mutual relations. Yet, in 2000–2009 there were many meetings of top-level politicians, including: Radosław Sikorski, Donald Tusk,

Aleksander Kwaśniewski, while Poland was visited by Mikhail Kasyanov, Sergei Lavrov, as well as Vladimir Putin. These visits contributed to a thaw in mutual relations.

2. Literature review

Historical inaccuracies, mutually exclusive versions of history, as well as the aggressive historical policy of both countries today have largely influenced the cold relations between Poland and Russia (Sanford, 2006). Bilateral cooperation in the creation of the Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Issues, set up in 2002, has contributed to the development of the dialogue between Warsaw and Moscow. The Group's actions have significantly influenced the process of resolving problematic historical issues (Chucherko, 2011), e.g. the causes of the outbreak of World War II.

The improvement in mutual relations between Poland and Russia on many planes (including the cultural and economic ones) was influenced by the functioning of local border traffic in 2012–2016, which included the Kaliningrad Oblast and some districts of the Pomeranian and Warmian-Masurian provinces on the Polish side (Palmowski, 2018).

The crash of a Polish TU-154 aircraft in Smolensk (Cześniak, 2014; Gieras, 2013) has given a new direction to Polish-Russian relations (Taras, 2014). In the context of investigating the causes and circumstances of the accident, reports of the Interstate Aviation Committee (IAC) and Jerzy Miller's commission are also important.

The symbolism of the Katyn massacre together with the newer phenomenon of the mythologization of the Smolensk catastrophe, as well as the heroization of the late President Lech Kaczyński, who died in it, is not without significance in the Polish policy pursued by the PiS [Law and Justice Party] governments in 2005–2007 and 2015–2020. D. Drozdowski

(2012), J.A. Drzewiecka & M. Hasian (2018), R. Fredheim (2014) and J. Niżyńska (2010) wrote about the phenomenon of mythologization of the above events.

The current shape of mutual relations was also influenced by various events in third countries, especially conflicts in which Poland and Russia took opposing positions. Examples include the Orange Revolution, extensively described by S. Pifer (2007), the Rose Revolution, described by C.H. Fairbanks (2004) and L.A. Mitchell (2006), the war in South Ossetia, discussed by R. Allison (2008), O. Antonenko (2008), S.E. Cornell & S.F. Starr (eds.) (2015) and S.N. MacFarlane (2010), as well as the crisis in Ukraine, to which L. Cleary (2016), H. Shelest (2015) and S.A. Sotiriou (2016) devoted their works.

Not only events in Eastern Europe, but also in the West affected relations between Warsaw and Moscow. The poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter (Gioe et al., 2019), which triggered decisive action against Russia not only by Poland (Lekki, 2018), but by many countries of the world (Wood, Henke, 2018) was an important event.

Poland's contemporary historical narrative (Blackler, 2012) is substantially different from the analogous area of politics pursued by the Russian government (Zięba, 2011). One should also emphasize the impact on international relations of actions, such as waging a disinformation war between the Kremlin and the West, as described by M. Baumann (2010).

Due to the growing conflicts between EU countries and Russia, the latter is accused of attacking computer systems of Western countries. These cyber-attacks are associated with a change in Russian geopolitical strategy after 2000 (Thornton, Miron, 2019).

Tab. 1. Opposite processes in 2010–2015 resulting from the Smolensk disaster

POSITIVE PROCESS	NEGATIVE PROCESS
participation of President Medvedev in the funeral of the presidential couple in Wawel	accusing Russia of causing the TU-154 plane crash
the presence of Bronisław Komorowski and Wojciech Jaruzelski at the Moscow parade on Victory Day	attempts to blame politicians of Platforma Obywatelska [Civil Platform Party] with the responsibility for the victims of the disaster by the politicians of Law and Justice
participation of Polish soldiers in the Moscow parade on Victory Day	dissemination of negatively marked vocabulary in the Polish narrative associated with the Smolensk catastrophe (calling it assassination, crime)

Source: the author's own study based on: Wiatr (2017).

3. Polish-Russian relations after the Smolensk disaster

The process of reconciliation between Poland and Russia was suddenly held up by the Smolensk disaster on 10 April 2010. It resulted in the emergence of a specific duality in Polish-Russian relations (Tab. 1).

After 10 April 2010, Polish-Russian relations were dominated by the subject of the Smolensk disaster. Attempts were made in the public space to mythologise this event, which can be exemplified by organising Smolensk monthlies. Attempts to accuse the Russian side of an attack, rejecting the version of an accident, or emergence of many conspiracy theories related to the course of the disaster were also obstacles to improving mutual relations (Gauszka, 2017).

Russia's first reaction was to announce the day of national mourning (April 12). A few days later, Andrzej Wajda's film *Katyn* aired on Russian television, and President Medvedev began to declassify the Katyn archives and to submit them to the Polish government (Dempsey, 2010). In December 2010, the Russian president came to Poland, where he signed agreements, among others, on youth exchange between Poland and Russia, as well as on setting up of the Centre for the Polish-Russian dialogue and understanding in Russia and an analogous institution in Poland.

Polish-Russian relations have gradually deteriorated due to tensions resulting from the long-lasting failure to determine the causes of the disaster, differences in the assessment of responsibility of persons and parties involved in the organization and control of the flight, as well as misunderstandings and lack of communication and agreement regarding the conduct of investigations. The dispute between the countries was exacerbated by the issue of handing over the wreck to the Polish side, as well as protecting it from weather conditions.

The policy pursued by the President of the Republic of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, was not continued after his death (among others, actions conducted jointly with Lithuania, such as vetoing the PCA (EU–Russia partnership and cooperation agreement), opposition to the Nord Stream, support for activities in Georgia and Ukraine and for the Belarusian issues). When the PO-PSL coalition took over power in Poland, the Polish international relations with its eastern neighbours were reversed. Warsaw distanced itself from Ukraine, as evidenced, for example, by dissolving the Polish-Ukrainian Peace Force Battalion (POLUKRBAT), and it also attempted to improve relations with Minsk, with which the Law and Justice government maintained rather cool relations. During its rule, the PO-PSL coalition accepted all

German-French projects without opposition and showed misplaced confidence in Russia.

The change in the American approach to Russia was an important factor in Polish-Russian relations. The United States position in the world was clearly weakened after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as after the financial crisis. The country under new leadership of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave hope for closer cooperation between the United States and Russia. The American administration decided to conduct a comprehensive review of the missile defence program, as a result of which the Polish-American agreement was not sent for ratification. Therefore, this decision meant abandoning the idea of deploying interceptor missiles in Poland (Polish-American negotiations..., 2012). These expectations were confirmed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during the ceremony in Katyn on April 7, 2010, when he charged the Stalinist leadership of the Soviet Union with responsibility for the Katyn massacre. The Russian Prime Minister also paid tribute to its victims, thus creating the premises for changes in Polish-Russian relations.

In February 2011, the Russian ambassador in Warsaw announced declassification of Katyn files and rehabilitation of victims of NKVD, while the State Duma admitted that Joseph Stalin was responsible for the Katyn massacre. Poland and Russia began a constructive dialogue on this matter, which could suggest building of partner contacts and an improvement in mutual relations (Rosyjski deputowany: Stosunki..., 2011).

Seven years after Poland's accession to the EU and the introduction of the visa requirement for Russian citizens (since 2003), the time came to conclude an agreement between both sides on border crossing facilitation. In December 2011, Poland concluded the local border traffic agreement (LBT) with Russia, which came into force in July 2012 (Palmowski, 2013). The introduction of facilitations resulting from the operation of the agreement significantly improved the relations between the sides, not only politically, but first and foremost socially. Visa waiver for residents of border areas facilitated and streamlined the crossing of the Polish-Russian border, which resulted in increased receipts from tourism and trade, as well as boosted relations between residents of the area covered by the agreement (Palmowski, 2013).

In November 2014, there was a diplomatic scandal (Rokossovskaa, 2014). Two men suspected of espionage for Russia were detected by the Military Counterintelligence Service (*Wydalenie rosyjskich dyplomatów?...*, 2014). Warsaw expelled Russian diplomats who, according to the findings, steered the

Tab. 2. Main inaccuracies related to World War II in the Russian and Polish narratives

Russia's allegations	Poland's position
heroization of the Nazis	Russia benefited the most from the outcome of the war
making changes to history	after 1945, Moscow subjugated Poland
slandering of Soviet soldiers	the war broke out in 1939 and not in 1941
diminishing the role of the Red Army in the liberation of Poland	the end of World War II was decided by the Western allies and not by the Soviet Union
lack of invitation for the Russian delegation to Polish celebration of the 80 th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II (September 1, 2019)	the war was possible due to agreements between the Soviet Union and the Nazis, i.e. the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact
no mention of several million Soviet soldiers who suffered wounds or lost their lives in the defence of Poland during World War II	The Red Army contributed to the escalation of the conflict in 1939 after it entered Poland on September 17

Source: the author's own study based on: Loginova (2020); Romik (2020).

Russian agents. Moscow, guided by the principle of reciprocity, decided to expel Polish diplomats from Russia. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs considered the behaviour of the Polish side as unjustified and hostile. Likewise, the Russian press (e.g. *Rossijskaja Gazieta*) presented Warsaw's decisions in a negative light (Rokossovskaja, 2014; *Rosja wydal polskich...*, 2014).

The deterioration of Polish-Russian relations in 2016 was affected by the Polish government's decision to suspend the LBT. As the reasons for its decision, the Polish side cited the organization of the NATO Summit and World Youth Day. Importantly, since the suspension of the LBT, there have been no reports of willingness to restore the LBT by Poland, and it should be emphasized that the solution imposed by the Polish government was supposed to be temporary (Palmowski, 2018).

In 2017, hacker attacks on Polish computer systems became so intensive and dangerous that the Polish Prime Minister, Beata Szydło, decided to convene the Government's Crisis Management Team in June. The Russian government actually has the tools and capabilities to launch cyberattacks on such a large scale (Lukito, 2019). No information was provided to the public about the actual administrator of the abovementioned attacks; however, the event itself prompted the international community to discuss threats and search for the source of the attacks. Due to the geopolitical situation (mainly in the context of the conflict in Ukraine) and for the past problems with Russia, a significant number of Poles suspected that Moscow was responsible for infecting computer systems (Duszczyk, 2019).

Tensions between Poland and Russia escalated as regards the issue of World War II and the roles played in it by individual countries. In connection with the

celebration of the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, the Russian side accused Poland of talking during this event about victims of the "Soviet plan", "assault by the Soviet Union", "Soviet occupation" (Loginova, 2020). Andrzej Przyłębski, Polish Ambassador to Germany, spoke in reply. Inaccuracies in the arguments from the statements of the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Polish ambassador are presented in Table 2.

Vladimir Putin was not invited to the celebration of the liberation of Auschwitz in 2020, which was another situation indicating a disagreement between both sides. The president's absence generated buzz in Russian media. The Polish side was then accused of making changes in the history of World War II, removing Soviet monuments, as well as unjustly blaming Russia for a number of offenses in the 20th c. (Posol RF..., 2020).

In the light of these events, relations between Poland and Russia remained unsatisfactory. Sergei Andreyev, Russia's ambassador to Poland, also recognized that the political situation in Poland is closely related to the authorities' attitude to the history of World War II, and these are bad relations between Warsaw and Moscow that affect its meaning and interpretation (Winogrodzki, 2020). Poland's counterposition was strengthened by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, who accused Russia of conducting an aggressive historical policy, which, among others, includes trying to reconstruct the Stalinist version of history (Nałęcz, 2020).

In January 2020, Vladimir Putin made a short address to the Federal Assembly. In his speech, the Russian president mainly discussed the issue of improving the social situation of Russians and the planned amendments to the constitution (Torop, 2020). According to the analysis of the address conducted

by the Centre for Eastern Studies, marginalization of foreign policy can be treated as a desire to continue the current one, while the announcement of a fight against falsification of history indicates an extension of the aggressive propaganda and political campaign on contemporary history (Menkiszak et al., 2020).

4. Summary

The notion of historical truth and accusations of historical hypocrisy are a recurring topic in the mutual dialogue. In the political rhetoric, mutual accusations of falsifying history have been present for several decades, and progressive disinformation, strengthening mutual resentment and negative stereotypes are its components. Difficult access to historical documents, as well as undermining their authenticity, is also a frequent phenomenon. This is largely associated with choosing the events to which attention should be paid, and this selection depends on political decisions.

“The Commentary of the Department of Information and Press at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia on the Russian-Polish dialogue on the history of our relations” was certainly an important declaration characterising Russia’s attitude towards Poland in early 2020. This document concludes that Poland is responsible for suspending the bilateral dialogue and for freezing many elements of cooperation, and all steps aimed at warming mutual relations should originate on its part (Komentarz Departamentu Informacji..., 2020).

In Russia’s activities, distorting history also involves interfering in the historical memory of representatives of other, most often neighbouring countries. Sergei Lavrov’s statement during the 56th Munich Security Conference in February 2020 exemplifies such an attempt. The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs imputed that in the circumstances of this year’s 75th anniversary of the end of World War II, there are attempts at a gross distortion of history. The Russian politician stressed that he primarily meant reducing the merits of the Red Army in ending the war, but also “equating Nazi executioners with Europe’s liberators” (Wystąpienie Ministra Spraw..., 2020).

Polish-Russian relations in the 21st c. have been dynamic; however, almost throughout the entire analysed period both countries have remained in opposition to each other. Their relations have mainly deteriorated, and their interests have practically never gone hand in hand, except for a few exceptions (the initial period of the PO-PSL coalition,

the introduction of a local border traffic with the Kaliningrad District, the initial period of the first term of Vladimir Putin’s presidency).

The Katyn massacre (as a symbol of martyrdom) and the Smolensk disaster can be primarily defined as the bone of contention in mutual relations. The conflict regarding these matters, which has been growing for many years, has cast a shadow over mutual relations, and it can be safely forecast that if both countries do not reach a consensus and solutions satisfying both sides (it can be presumed from the hitherto attempts that there are none), the improvement in mutual relations will be impossible.

Regarding the history of both countries, Poland has been expecting Russia to apologize for the Stalinist crimes of the Soviet Union for years. However, Russia, which also suffered many wrongs during the Stalinist regime, does not feel any responsibility and in its narrative always uses the argument that it does not understand why a victim would apologize to a victim. The history of World War II, the responsibilities and roles played in this war by individual countries are also inconsistent in Poland’s and Russia’s narratives. Seeking a compromise and trying to reach an agreement, both countries decided to set up a Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Issues, whose activities in many respects has brought Poland and Russia closer in perceiving shared history and has contributed to improving mutual relations.

The shaping of Polish-Russian relations in the 21st c. can be related to many changes in the internal transformations of both countries. Events in other countries in which the two states took different positions also played a role in the shaping of their mutual relations. This contributed to further cooling or worsening of already bad Polish-Russian relations. Examples of these events include the Orange Revolution, the Rose Revolution, the Georgian crisis, the crisis in Ukraine, and the poisoning of Sergei Skripal and his daughter.

Vladimir Putin’s address of January 2020 may constitute a basis for forecasting relations between Poland and Russia in the third decade of the 21st c. It follows from the Russian leader’s words that Moscow will probably continue its current foreign and historical policies.

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