



EASTERN CHESSBOARD

Geopolitical Determinants and Challenges
in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus

edited by Piotr Bajor and Kamila Schöll-Mazurek

Eastern Chessboard



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Kraków

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Editors:

Piotr Bajor, Kamila Schöll-Mazurek

Reviewer:

Ph.D. Marek Czajkowski

Proofreading:

Anna Sekułowicz

Cover design:

Oskar Ostafin

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KSIEGARNIA AKADEMICKA

ul. św. Anny 6, 31-008 Kraków

tel./faks: 12 431 27 43, 12 421 13 87

e-mail: akademicka@akademicka.pl

Online bookstore: www.akademicka.pl

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Introduction

This new publication concerning the geopolitical situation and the challenges for security in the region of Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus has been the result of the research within the international research project: “Geopolitical Dilemmas. Poland and Germany and the Processes and Challenges of Europeanisation in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus”, co-ordinated by the Faculty of International and Political Studies of Jagiellonian University and Viadrina European University in Frankfurt (Oder). The realisation of this project was possible thanks to the financial support of the Foundation for Polish-German Co-operation, the Robert Bosch Foundation and the “Bratniak” Foundation, for whom the authors wish to express their gratitude.

The realisation of this project led to the creation of a scientific consortium and research network, whereby academics representing various countries could carry out their research, the results of which have been published in this book. This publication contains papers prepared by both Polish and German authors, as well as by scientists from those states covered by the Eastern Partnership Programme. The studies of these European academics have been enriched by adding the perspective of researchers from the USA and China, whose papers have also been published in this book.

The conflict in Ukraine led to a complete change in the geopolitical situation in Central and Eastern Europe and affected the level of security in the region. The objective of the studies within the consortium was thus the examination of the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on current geopolitical conditions in that part of the world, as well as the level of regional security. The publication presents texts discussing the most significant problems and processes affecting the shape of the deformed geopolitical “Eastern Chessboard” in a world region regarded up until now as stable.

The editors wish to thank the authors for their research within the project and the publication of the results in this volume. Anyone interested in the geopolitical situation and the challenges for regional security in Central and Eastern Europe is invited to read the publication and the publishers hope for a warm reception from readers.

Piotr Bajor

Kamila Schöll-Mazurek

JOANNA FOMINA

Narrowing the Gap: Convergence of German and Polish Public Attitudes towards the Russian-Ukrainian Conflict

The annexation of the Crimean peninsula by Russia and the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict have triggered varied reactions in Europe. Although in response to the Russian aggression against Ukraine the Western governments have imposed limited individual and economic sanctions and the EU has managed to speak in one voice there, agreeing common position was not easy. Some EU member-states, including Bulgaria, Greece or Hungary strongly opposed sanctions. The EP elections turned in a strong representation of European right-wing populist parties intent on dismantling the EU and openly expressing their admiration for Putin's Russia as a counterweight to both EU liberals as well as the US influence. Today, some EU member-states claim that there is no need to continue the sanctions, while others – that the EU policy should preserve its tough position on Russia. Public attitudes in different countries certainly vary, but the dividing lines do not necessarily fall along the borders of member-states. Although both Polish and German governments support continuation of sanctions as well as the introduction of further sanctions in case of more violations on the part of Russia, there is a widespread public perception that Poles and Germans are in two opposing camps with regard to Russia. The article focuses on the analysis of German and Polish public opinion on the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the EU's reaction towards it. It attempts to investigate whether there is convergence or divergence of public opinions in these two EU member states. The survey results demonstrate that despite a popular perception of Poles as Russophobes and of Germans as Russophiles, and thus an expected difference of attitudes towards the ongoing events in the two societies, we may observe considerable convergence of opinions in both countries.

It may be a truism to say that the public attitudes towards Russia in Poland and Germany are determined by matters of history, public memory as well as economic relations. Yet, without taking into account these factors we may fail to understand the dynamics of public opinion in both countries. Before we focus on the discussion of public attitudes¹ towards the current political developments in Russia and Ukraine and the EU policy towards these countries, we will briefly discuss the more general differences in perceptions of Ukraine and Russia in Poland and Germany determining the views on the current event. The present convergence of public opinions in the two countries is much more pronounced against these differences.

Germans, when referring to Russia, still often call it their Neighbour², despite the fact that the two countries do not have a shared border. This reflects the attitude towards Ukraine that for a very long time was nothing else than one of many countries of the former Soviet Union, and thus firmly belonging to Russia's area of privileged interests. The Ukrainian Orange Revolution of 2004 has only somewhat changed this perception.

In an interview with *Die Welt*, German historian of Eastern Europe, Karl Schlögel, calls German Russophilia a *mixture of sentimentality, nostalgia, cowardice and kitsch*³. The term *Russlandversteher* has been coined to refer to those claiming to "understand" and often justify Russia's policies vis-à-vis its neighbours. The *Russlandversteher* perspective is partially shared by the public opinion as well as voiced by political elites' representatives, including two former Social Democratic chancellors, Gerhard Schröder and Helmut Schmidt. Schmidt referred to Russia's annexation of the Crimea as *understandable*. Schröder, in his turn, celebrated his 70th birthday literally in Putin's arms in St. Petersburg.⁴ In March 2014, according to an opinion poll by the Institute Forsa, only 24 percent of respondents supported economic sanctions against Russia. In the same month, according to an opinion poll by Infratest, 54 percent of respondents believed that the West should accept Russia's annexation of the Crimea.⁵

¹ I wish to express my deep gratitude to the Institute of Public Affairs in Warsaw and to the Bertelsmann Foundation (Berlin) for sharing the research results collected as part of their project on German, Polish and Russian public opinion regarding the Russia-Ukraine crisis. In Poland the survey was conducted by TNS Polska on a representative sample of 1000 adult Poles in the period from 13 to 18 February 2015. In Germany it was conducted by TNS EMNID in the period from 13 to 21 February 2015 on a representative sample of adult Germans.

² J. Kucharczyk et al., *Close Together or Far Apart? Poles, Germans and Russians on the Russia-Ukraine Crisis*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2015.

³ "Putin ist Dschingis Khan mit Internet", *Die Welt*, 2 May 2014, at <http://www.welt.de/kultur/literarischewelt/article127510809/Putin-ist-Dschingis-Khan-mit-Internet.html>, 15 May 2015.

⁴ Y. H. Ferguson, "Rising Powers, Global Governance: theoretical perspectives", *Rising Powers, Global Governance and Global Ethics*, Jamie Gaskarth (ed.), Abingdon 2015, pp. 21-40.

⁵ M. Wehner, "How Should Europe React to Russia? German View", *ECFR*, 18 November 2014, at: http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_how_should_europe_respond_to_russia_the_german_view356, 15 May 2015.

The presence of *Russlandversteher* reflects Germany's conflicted identity, its balancing between the West and the East, which dates back to much earlier than the period of the Cold War and the partitioning of Germany. A major historiographic debate concerns Germany's *Sonderweg* (special path). Usually the latter concept was used to explain Germany's deviation from the normal course of western democracies to Nazism. But a variation of this concept also reflects the ambivalence of Germany vis-à-vis the West embodied by the USA and the East embodied by Russia. Although Germany is a profoundly Western country, a liberal democracy upholding the rule of law and a member of the Atlantic alliance, it has a sentimental attitude towards Russia, its "enigmatic soul", its culture and assumed moral superiority towards the West, not unrelated to the victory of the Soviet Union in WWII. Indeed, only 45 percent of Germans, according to ARD-Deutschlandtrend in April 2014, believe that Germany's place as "firmly in the Western alliance", while 49 percent claim that Germany should take a "place in the middle" between the West and Russia.⁶

Germany's war guilt in the face of Russia's monopolisation of the war suffering⁷ is an important factor here. Germans are convinced the Soviet Union's victory in the WWII somehow guarantees Russia, the Soviet empire's heir, a special treatment. Russian propaganda accusations of the Ukrainian government and Euromaidan of being "fascist" resonate particularly strongly with many Germans, who tend to forget that in fact the territories of contemporary Ukraine (and Belarus) were fully occupied by Nazi Germany during the WWII, and Ukrainians served in the Soviet Army alongside Russians and other nationalities. Thus the war toll of the Ukrainian people was in no way smaller than of the Russian people. Yet, Germans often accept Russia's *martyrdom imperialism* or as Snyder explains, Russia's *implicitly claiming territory by explicitly claiming victims*⁸. As a result, many uncritically accept Russia's claims vis-à-vis its neighbouring countries.

One should not underestimate the pragmatic dimension either. Germany has the closest economic ties with Russia, and thus *the most leverage and the most to lose*⁹. Finally, the considerable "Russian" communities in Berlin and other German cities make Russians more familiar to Germans – even though a large share of these migrants from the former Soviet Union are ethnic Jews, Germans or Ukrainians. Yet, all these things considered, recently the German government have found that dialogue with Russia's political leaders leads nowhere and strongly advocated the sanctions.

The Polish-Russian historical legacy, the Soviet Union aggression against Poland in the WWII as well as the ensuing de facto occupation of Poland after the war make

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ T. Snyder, "Holocaust: The Ignored Reality", *The New York Review*, 16 July 2009, at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2009/jul/16/holocaust-the-ignored-reality>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Y.H. Ferguson, *op. cit.*

Poles rather suspicious towards Russia and shape the perceptions of political relations between the two countries in general. The pro-Russian sentiment is certainly less pronounced in Poland than in Germany, yet it is also present. It is predominantly shared by the radical right (fascination with the alleged Russian might, the imperial legacy) and radical left (anti-fascism, alter-globalism and the Soviet legacy). There is also an understanding that smaller nations on the periphery of the European Union will be the biggest losers if Russia decides to retaliate.

Poland is much more interested in Ukraine's affairs. Poland is often viewed as an "advocate of Ukraine in the EU"¹⁰, as successive Polish governments' have supported Ukraine's pro-European aspirations. The motto associated with Józef Piłsudski and repeated by many contemporary politicians that *there is no free Poland without free Ukraine, there is no free Ukraine without free Poland* could be understood both in symbolic as well as in pragmatic terms. Pro-democratic revolutions resonate strongly with Poles who take pride in their love of freedom and their historical legacy. At the same time, a democratic and stable Ukraine is perceived as a buffer zone against the less predictable Russia; while any instability in Ukraine also threatens the situation in Poland.

Yet, the Polish public is more ambivalent about Ukraine and Ukrainians, especially due to the mutual historical legacy. Many Poles still associate Ukraine and Ukrainians with the slaughter of ethnic Poles living in the Volhynia (Wołyń)¹¹ and are particularly perceptive to the Russian propaganda about alleged Ukrainian fascists – *banderovets*¹². Moreover, due to considerable economic migration of Ukrainians to Poland, Ukrainians are often associated with cheap unskilled labour. As a result, Poles often have a somewhat condescending attitude to Ukrainians.

With regard to Poles' sympathy (friendliness) towards different nations, interestingly enough Russians and Ukrainians score similarly. Although the scores in particular years may differ, usually between 15 and 35% of Poles express positive attitudes towards both Russians and Ukrainians, whereas the level of negative sentiments has been higher in case of both peoples. Throughout 1990s and early 2000s it stayed at the level of 50-60%, to drop in 2008 and to have remained at around 30%. Yet, negative sentiment towards Russia has plummeted again after the Crimea annexation to have reached the level of 50% in 2015.

The Polish authorities have expressed unequivocal support for Ukraine in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Yet there have been more controversies with regard to

¹⁰ "Interview with Director of Polish-German Cooperation Foundation, Cornelius Ochmann", *Polish Radio Programme I*, at <http://www.polskieradio.pl/7/129/Artykul/1400526,Dyrektor-Fundacji-Wspolpracy-PolskoNiemieckiej-Polska-adwokatem-Ukrainy-na-arenie-miedzynarodowej>.

¹¹ J. Fomina et. al., *Polska – Ukraina, Polacy – Ukraińcy. Spojrzenie przez granicę*, Institute of Public Affairs, Warsaw 2013.

¹² From Stepan Bandera (1909-1959), Ukrainian nationalist politician, one of the leaders of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists.

What is going on east of the West becomes more and more important in today's world. This book gives very good insight into the issue, especially what concerns Ukraine, Moldova and Armenia. Different countries, with different problems but one in common – Russian influence and tensions that it generates. [...] Good book conceived by good team of authors from several countries, working together within a framework of well organized international research project.

Ph. D. Marek Czajkowski



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