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# How do you avoid others talking over your head? Poland's approach to Russia at a time of confrontation

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**Katarzyna Pełczyńska-Nałęcz**

The conflict between Russia and the West has its origins in the weakness of Russia, but it is the future of this conflict that will largely define the power and resilience of the trans-Atlantic community. Poland is the largest NATO/EU member bordering on Russia. Moreover, it borders on Ukraine, a country that is effectively at war with Moscow. Poland's relationship with Russia is one of the major 'big games' in Europe which broadly affects security and prosperity in the region. If Poland wants to be a player in this game, and not the plaything of other players, it is critical that it takes an active part in the processes of conflict management and resolution.

First and foremost, Poland's policy must not rely on scaremongering and limiting itself almost exclusively to alerting the public and allies about the threats coming from Russia. Any act of interaction with Russia is often seen as 'collaborating with the enemy', an accusation often made by all political parties. This approach is both convenient for the elites (not only political ones) and utterly ineffective for the pursuit of Poland's national interest. Giving up on dialogue is a tempting proposition: it relieves one of the obligation to take difficult decisions and make rotten concessions, and helps avoid accusations of dealing with a 'shady partner'. However, the problem is that excluding ourselves from talks does not mean we are avoiding compromise. All we are doing is allowing others to reach compromise over our heads. By refusing to enter into any dialogue, Poland is accepting what it has always feared: marginalisation. This policy is particularly dangerous in an era of numerous crises in Europe, when

our allies may be tempted to sweep their issues with Russia under the carpet in the face of more urgent challenges.

**Therefore, Poland should take pro-active measures to build peace, while at the same time engaging in clearly essential measures to prevent aggression. By contributing to a mature dialogue with Moscow aimed at developing policies that will satisfy the entire trans-Atlantic community, Poland has an opportunity to become a co-architect of relations between the West and Russia. It can also overcome its historic entanglement with its largest eastern neighbour.**

This paper makes recommendations for policy towards Russia from the perspective of Poland and its society. Good policy will always be based on a thorough diagnosis, especially in a time of crisis. Therefore, the recommendations section is preceded by a review of the sources of conflict and the resulting challenges for the security of Poland and the whole of Europe.

## Sources of conflict

The annexation of Crimea and the use of military instruments by Moscow to deprive Ukraine of its control over the Donbas have demonstrated that Russia is a country that generates serious threats to European security. However, any adequate policy response must be inspired by something more than this obvious proposition. It is essential that the nature and likelihood of threats from our eastern neighbour should be assessed. Questions must be asked about what has actually happened in Russia that has pushed Kremlin to such confrontational actions.

It is of fundamental importance to understand that there was no sudden turn in Russian politics in February 2014. **The military action against Ukraine was a culmination of four earlier evolutionary processes.**

## The consolidation of the post-Communist political order

The components of the political and institutional culture that have traditionally been strong in Russia have gained momentum since the beginning of the 21st century. These include centralisation and personalisation of power, and the perception of society by those in power as a 'mass' that must be controlled and guided<sup>1</sup>. The government instrumentalises the individual (the interests of the state not only justify but actually demand individual sacrifice) and privatises much of the state's resources. In return, the government is expected to give its subjects a sense of economic stability, collective force and grandeur. If that is ensured, the majority of the subjects will defend the authoritarian order hand in hand with the government. The protesting minority is perceived as a threat to the power and authority of the state and to the entire community<sup>2</sup>.

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1 Traditional relations between government and society in Russia are examined by M. Sniegovaya in *Kult gosudarstva y donbaskyi scenaryi dla Rosyi*, 17 June 2016. <http://gefter.ru/archive/18972>.

2 Research conducted by the Levada Centre has revealed that democratic rights and liberties are valued by a small minority of the public (not more than 20 per cent). D. Volkov, S. Goncharov, *Demokratia v Rosseyi: ustanovki nasilienia*. Levada Centre, 2015 [http://www.levada.ru/old/sites/default/files/report\\_fin.pdf](http://www.levada.ru/old/sites/default/files/report_fin.pdf).

Another feature of the system, but one which is quite new in Russian history, is that the ruling elites are dominated by Soviet and post-Soviet secret service agents<sup>3</sup>. This characteristic of the people in power has turned the state into a 'special operation', both in internal and external policy dimensions. Their tactics have inherently become non-transparent and unpredictable. Yet, the 'new' Russian elite is not guided by any distinct ideology; its world-view is on the one hand a carbon copy of the Soviet mindset (anti-Americanism, spheres of influence as a policy framework), and on the other is cynical and pragmatic.

While the post-Communist political order in Russia has used the nomenclature of democracy (constitution, elections), it has stood in contradiction to the concept and value of democracy. Despite intense (and effective) efforts to manage the collective consciousness to harness support for the present regime, the Western democracies are perceived by the ruling elites as models that may at some point be accepted by the Russian society as an attractive alternative<sup>4</sup>.

The signing of the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union that was supposed to happen towards the end of 2013 was interpreted by the Russian government as the move of political liberalism 'towards 'the Kremlin's gates'. According to this logic, the success of the democratic project in Ukraine would have challenged the Russian regime. Thus, the condemnation of 'colour revolutions' and the aggression in Ukraine were designed as a protection against revolution. The method of condemnation was a choice typical of secret service agents rather than of civilian politicians.

## Compensating for the weakness of the state by militarisation

The consolidation of the authoritarian political model has inhibited the mechanisms for modernisation in the Russian public and private sectors. As a result, the quality of government institutions, public services and the economic prosperity of the country have suffered enormously<sup>5</sup>. The process has remained invisible to the general public in Russia due to the decade-long influx of money from the strong commodity markets which camouflaged the mounting governance problems. The militarisation of internal and foreign policy, as demonstrated by the annexation of Crimea, has become an instrument of compensating for the weakening capabilities of the Russian state. This mechanism has proven highly effective to the Russian authorities: it has given the illusion of a great state to the Russian citizens, and has prevented Russia being ignored by international partners<sup>6</sup>. At the same time, it has not infringed on the vested interests of the major groups of influence (it has in fact strengthened the military elites and weakened the post-Yeltsin oligarchs), and has thus fossilised the present system of governance in Russia.

3 This trend unfolded in the 1990s. According to O. Krysztanowska, 58.3 per cent of ruling elites were people with shoulder marks in 2002. In contrast, this figure was 46.4 per cent in 1999 at the end of the Yeltsin era, 33.3 per cent when Yeltsin took power in 1993, and 4.8 per cent at the end of Gorbachev's rule in 1988. O. Krysztanowska, *Anatomia Rosyjskiej Elity*, p. 159, Moscow 2005.

4 The government's concerns were fuelled by the pro-democratic protests in late 2011 and early 2012, and by the falling approval ratings for a concentrated, one-man rule and for Putin himself. K. Rogov, *Politicheskiye tsykly postsovietskovo tranzita*, Pro et Contra 4–5 2012, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra\\_56\\_6-32.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra_56_6-32.pdf).

5 Russia's limited capabilities for modernisation are manifested by falling investment levels, by 3 per cent in 2014 and by 8.4 per cent in 2015. The quality of public services is illustrated by data on healthcare and education spending: 3.4 per cent of GDP (the EU average was 7.2 per cent) and 3.5 per cent of GDP (the EU's average was 4.9 per cent) respectively in 2015, according to the OECD.

6 Putin has always recorded record-high approval ratings after such 'special operations': against Chechnya (from 31 per cent in August 1999 to 84 per cent in January 2000), the war in Georgia (88 per cent) and after the annexation of Crimea (from 61 per cent in November 2013 to 86 per cent in June 2014). Sources: monitoring of approval ratings of Putin, Levada Centre [www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/](http://www.levada.ru/indikatory/odobrenie-organov-vlasti/) and D. Volkov (Levada); *Kak ros i padal reyting Putina*, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/denisvolkov/1169716-echo/>.

## The marginalisation of Russia in the global decision-making process

As a non-member of the EU and NATO, i.e. of the major European political and economic organisation and the world's largest military alliance affiliating most European countries and the USA, Russia has remained outside of the mainstream decision-making forums. The idea of a 'Greater Europe' in which Russia would be integrated with the West has proven unrealistic. First, approximating Russia's legal standards and practices to those applicable in the European Union would necessitate a very deep transformation of Russian state institutions and traditional mindsets. Secondly, this would have to involve the recognition of the superiority of the West, the sources of the standards and practices. This would not be acceptable to the Russian government, nor, to some extent, to Russian society. Consequently, as the integration process continues in Europe, Russia would have to accept the fact that its former satellite countries are influencing decision-making processes while Russia itself has been sliding into the periphery. The expansion of institutions for Russia/EU and Russia/NATO<sup>7</sup> dialogue has not met Moscow's expectations. Clearly, these institutions have not allowed Russia to interfere with the decision-making processes of either organisation, and over time, Russia has increasingly expressed its discontentment with the situation, particularly vociferously in Putin's speech of 10 February 2007 in Munich<sup>8</sup>. The impending conclusion of the Association Agreement between the EU and Ukraine, without obtaining Moscow's consent, and then the loss of power by the pro-Russian Ukrainian president, Viktor Yanukovich, crossed the red line for the Kremlin. Not only did Russia think its aspirations to 'co-rule in Greater Europe' had been ostensibly ignored, but it felt as if this was an attempt by the United States and its allies to assume economic power and take control in the sphere of security in a territory hitherto 'governed' by Moscow.

## The progressive collapse of the 'post-Soviet Russian zone of influence'

The Russian concept of security is dominated by the dogmas of territory and geography. This implies that in its security policy Russia relies less on the international legal order, economic and political links, but on a territorial buffer that separates it from any potential opponent. Such a definition of security means that the desire to control the immediate surroundings is rooted not only from an imperial identity, but is first and foremost a pillar of the country's security policy.

Therefore, the collapse of the USSR by no means implies that Russia would give up control over the former Soviet republics (with the exception of the Baltic states). This time, however, the imperial policy is dressed up as 'sponsorship'. Russia has shared the commodity advantage with post-Soviet countries while giving the elites access to lucrative 'shady deals', and has spread its political umbrella over the corrupt, criminal and authoritarian regimes established by the elites. In return, it has received the right to exercise military and political patronage with a flexible and negotiable scope. The only non-negotiable condition has been exclusivity, i.e. not allowing the US and its 'acolytes' to exert any political or military influence.

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7 The Partnership and Co-operation Agreement of 1997 established institutions for political dialogue: the EU/Russia summit (twice a year), the Co-operation Council (a high-level body; dialogue on energy matters began in 2000; in 2003, a decision was made to form four common spaces (1) economy; (2) freedom, justice and security; (3) education, research and culture; (4) external security), Roadmaps to the four spaces were developed in 2005.

The Founding Act was signed with Russia at the NATO Summit in 1997: a Permanent Joint NATO/Russia Council was established, and later replaced by the NATO/Russia Council by virtue of the Declaration of Rome in 2002.

8 In his speech, Putin addressed the issue of NATO enlargement: "I believe it is obvious that NATO expansion does not have anything in common with the modernisation of the alliance and ensuring security in Europe.

It is a serious provocation that lowers the level of mutual trust." <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>.

Over the past 15 years, this rule has been broken more and more frequently: Georgia and (although less so) Ukraine revealed their NATO aspirations; EU Association Agreements were negotiated by Georgia, Armenia, Moldova and Ukraine. Each time, Moscow's reaction was rather edgy. The Russian military aggression in Georgia in 2008 essentially buried the country's dreams of becoming a NATO member in the immediate future, and demonstrated that deterrence can be effective in extreme situations and carries no risk of long-term international ostracism.

The 'Ukrainian revolution' was interpreted as another attempt at breaking the exclusivity rule. Moreover, Moscow believed that the 'post-Soviet empire' had essentially no *raison d'être* without Ukraine. The annexation of Crimea, and more importantly the operation in the Donbas, was designed to prevent such a scenario.

All the said processes are still active: (1) the consolidation of the 'secret service oligarchy' as an alternative regime to liberal democracies, (2) the compensation of state deterioration by re-militarisation, (3) the decomposition of the 'post-Soviet Russian zone of influence' perceived as a pillar of Russia's security, and (4) seeking to review the mechanisms for determining the international order. These processes define the scope and nature of the challenges posed by Russian politics towards the EU and NATO, including Poland.

## What are the challenges?

First and foremost, confrontational relations with Russia must not be perceived as a single act of escalation, but as a long-term phenomenon fuelled by processes which are unlikely to be suppressed in the near future.

The motivations behind Russia's decision to antagonise its relations with the EU, NATO and the USA suggest a rather ambivalent attitude to the West. On the one hand, the West is perceived as the most important source of threats, but also as an attractive partner on the other. Making big politics on a par with Western leaders (especially with the USA), the opportunity of participating in the decision-making process regarding Europe and the trans-Atlantic area, has been one of the key determinants for Russia of its position in the international arena.

It must be remembered that pragmatism is one of the predominant qualities of Russia's ruling elites. While Russian propaganda (speaking to the general public) explains the country's actions as motivated by ideology (the defence of traditional values, support for its fellow citizens, etc.) the actual motivation appears to be more distant from ideological fanaticism. Instead, it is dominated by utilitarianism and cynicism, which is illustrated by the fact that the West remains a destination for Russian investment capital, a place of education for the children of the political and financial elites, and a place for medical treatment and holidays for affluent Russians, despite the chilly mutual relations.

The pragmatism of the Russian government has manifested itself in the use of military instruments when confronting the West. There are two qualities that describe the Russian involvement in this respect. First, it has been peripheral: Moscow has struck at spots which are sensitive yet far from the centres of political and geographic conflict (e.g. the aggression in the Donbas was in fact aimed against Kyiv and the influence of Washington and Brussels; the military presence in Syria was mainly designed to strengthen Russia's position vis-a-vis the EU and US). This *modus operandi* points to Russia's unwillingness to face head-on confrontation. Secondly, the military measures have been closely

linked to diplomatic processes. In other words, the military operations were intended to support the arguments presented via diplomatic channels, and not replace them.

In the light of the above, a head-on military conflict seems rather unlikely at the moment. Moreover, the tensions between Russia and the West will not necessarily be linear, but may soften from time to time; when they peak again, some room for co-operation is likely to co-exist with the conflict. What is likely is that Moscow will continue its hybrid diplomacy, including tactics that allow for limited, peripheral armed conflict, provocation and other illegitimate measures as acceptable means of pressure in matters of key importance to its national interest. While it is hard to predict any specific measures today, the post-Soviet area and its European part will be the most sensitive area (except for the Baltic states).

This is the context in which to examine the future of the conflict in eastern Ukraine. **Russia's withdrawal from the Donbas seems very unlikely now. The armed forces of the separatists are now essentially operating as a Russian contingent<sup>9</sup>. Russia's goal is not to conquer new territories but to convert the military potential accumulated in the Donbas into a political capacity that would ensure structural mechanisms of influence on the future of Ukraine.**

While there are many signs of Russia's inherent pragmatism and ability to restrain itself, the escalation of conflicts into a negative scenario, i.e. a larger-scale armed conflict, cannot be ruled out completely. The biggest risk may not lie in unexpected incidents; Russia will react strongly but with self-restraint. The biggest risk is long-term, and is related to militarisation as a result of accumulated weakness. Defence spending requires an ever greater sacrifice of the country's economic growth, human capital, education and research. Consequently, the gap between the military capabilities and economic prosperity has been widening, and there has been a push for a greater use of hard force in international relations to compensate for the country's 'civilisational backwardness'.

The challenges regarding Russia go far beyond hard security threats. First and foremost, this is being observed in the post-Soviet space. The combination of three trends: (1) inhibited modernisation both in Russia and in most post-Soviet republics, (2) the depletion of Russian resources that support the inefficient 'satellite countries' and (3) the Kremlin's objections to their emancipation and forging closer ties with the West, may lead to an ever deeper crisis in the state structures in these regions. The costs of such negative scenarios are hard to estimate, but they would almost certainly be particularly painful for Central Europe.

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9 According to Novaya Gazeta, which has carried out one of the best in-depth reviews of the situation in the DNR and LNR, the armed forces of both separatist republics have essentially been combined and are 32,000–35,000 strong, under the command of 1200 officers trained in militaries academies in Russia. To quote A. Lipski, "The times of field commanders, Cossacks and military activists are over. The control exercised by DNR/LNR leaders over the operations of and funding for the armed forces has in fact been lost." A. Lipski, *Kak vyskochit' iz minskoy lovushki*, *Novaya Gazeta*, 24 June 2016.

Compared with the average salary of about 4000–5000 roubles (€60–70) in separatist regions, privates earn about 15,000 roubles, junior officers earn 25,000–30,000 roubles. Military service is nearly the only source of livelihood. P. Kanygin, *Seraya voyna*, *Novaya Gazeta*, 6 June 2016.

Moreover, those DNR/LNR leaders who enjoyed at least relative autonomy from Moscow have been deprived of power or killed (see e.g. <http://newstes.ru/2015/09/06/perevorot-v-dnr-purgin-hotel-stat-nezavisimym-ot-ki-eva-and-kremlya-a-pushilin-and-zaharchenko-ego-ubrali-ekspert.html> and <http://voenpolit.su/geopolitics/1358-v-dnr-pobezhdaet-partiya-mirotvorcev.html>).

The soft security challenges arising from the confrontation with Russia also affect countries in the European Union and NATO. The main challenge comes from the binary nature of Russian foreign policy and the tendency to exploit the weaknesses of other players. Needless to say, Russia's actions will often be very quick and effective. Its administration is highly responsive because it is not entangled in complicated bureaucratic procedures and democratic accountabilities<sup>10</sup>. Russia has a wide spectrum of 'soft aggression' tools, including a propaganda apparatus in the form of Russia Today, a TV channel that enjoys quite strong popularity in the West. It breeds hostility to democratic elites, fuels Euro-scepticism and trans-Atlantic discrepancies. Russia has also used hybrid online tools (pro-Russian trolling)<sup>11</sup>.

Yet it would be an exaggeration to claim that Russia has the potential to 'dismantle' European liberal democracies. Even though Moscow does not have the instruments to provoke crises in the EU or NATO, it can still exacerbate the existing problems in these organisations. The most vulnerable targets may include the failure of state institutions, especially the uniformed services and the secret service, and corruption and conflicts caused by identity crises within some member states (divisions within the EU and NATO, anti-democratic, nationalist and populist tendencies)<sup>12</sup>.

## How to act?

There are two general premises on which to build relations with Russia:

**First**, it could be argued that nearly everything Poland does on the international arena (and much of our domestic developments) directly affects our attitude to towards Russia one way or the other. Our policy towards Moscow largely transcends bilateral affairs or discussions within the EU or NATO about our largest neighbour in the East. Poland's strategy towards Moscow is formed in parallel to our actions regarding Brussels, Berlin and Washington, as well as Minsk and Kiev. Much depends on the way we form and deliver on our visions for European and trans-Atlantic integration.

**Secondly**, a realistic policy towards Moscow must rely on a broader perspective of the wider world and the reality of international relations. In the increasingly multipolar world of today, lines of division cross and alliances overlap. A friend of a friend may be an enemy, and an enemy of an enemy may be

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10 For example, when Turkish soldiers downed a Russian plane on 24 November 2015, within three days President Putin had signed a decree banning imports of a wide range of goods into Russia, the renewal of construction contracts and tourist travel to Turkey. The decree formally came into force on 1 January 2016, but as a matter of fact a number of restrictive measures were taken several days after the plane had gone down: tourist visits to Turkey were immediately limited, over 50 universities terminated their co-operation agreements with Turkish partners, and several universities expelled some Turkish students.

11 *Inter alia* P. Pomerantsev, 'Beyond Propaganda: How authoritarian regimes are learning to engineer human souls in the age of Facebook', *Foreign Policy*; <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/23/beyond-propaganda-legatum-transitions-forum-russia-china-venezuela-syria/>.

12 Russian engagement designed to exploit the West's weakness is observed in the following fields: (1) propaganda (A. Wilson, *Four Types of Russian Propaganda*, Aspen Review on Central Europe, 9 March 2016. <http://www.aspeninstitute.cz/en/article/4-2015-four-types-of-russian-propaganda/>) (2) support for cyber-attacks (*Germany says Russia probably behind cyber attacks on Bundestag*, Reuters, 13 May 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-russia-cyber-idUSKCN0Y41FC>)

(3) Support for radical anti-EU parties (P. Krekó, L. Györi, *Russia and the European Far Left*, The Institute for Statecraft, 11 April 2016)

(4) Attempts at building alliances with the European and US right-wing to 'defend traditional and Christian values' (<http://imrussia.org/en/analysis/world/2500-putinism-and-the-european-far-right> <http://112.international/article/european-puzzle-putin-and-far-right-groups-part-1-4701.html>).

a friend. All the major players are enmeshed in numerous conflicts of variable weight depending on developments.

Under these circumstances, Poland cannot reasonably expect that the conflict with Russia will be the top priority for all our allies at all times. Moreover, it would be naive to believe that the other players will position themselves as Russia's enemies only because they are in one bloc with countries such as Poland, i.e. countries that see Russia as a strategic challenge. Those who believe that Moscow may be a source of threats will not always carry the confrontation into all fields, and often do not do so. Today, the ability to continue a selective dialogue inside a confrontation is perceived as a natural and desirable one. This is the nature of relations between the two global superpowers, USA and China. Most EU member states are working towards that type of a relationship with Russia. Conflicts are expensive, and their costs can be reduced if a space for co-operation is carved out. Moreover, a partner who is incapable of engaging in a parallel strategy of both co-operation and confrontation is perceived as an extreme menace (as it inflates the costs of conflict for both its allies and itself), and will often be eliminated from the decision-making process.

## Five recommendations

### First: Teamwork

The confrontation with Russia that has increased the sense of threat in Poland results not from bilateral disputes, but from a fundamental conflict between Moscow and the Western world regarding compliance with international law. Problems like these can only be resolved in a collective format. Poland's natural allies are to be found in the European Union and NATO. Nevertheless, there are players in both groups who are more or less committed or influential. Effective teamwork requires deep and intensive co-operation not with those with whom we find interactions easier, but with those who have the biggest influence on policy. In NATO, the US is the unquestionable leader in shaping policy towards Russia, and Germany is the leader in the EU. Without these partners, no Polish policy towards Russia will be effective. This does not mean that Warsaw should not pro-actively co-ordinate its policy with as many allies and in as many formats as possible. The Weimar Triangle may play a particularly instrumental role (France is also a member of the Normandy Format) as can Nordic/Baltic co-operation and other frameworks. Caution should be exercised with respect to regional formats in the context of policy towards Russia. Their common denominator is almost exclusively geographic proximity and the shared Communist past (such as the Visegrád Group). It is in the interests of Poland and the entire European Community that divisions between Western and Central Europe should not be revived. The policy towards Russia, a country that formed the core of an empire controlling all Europe east of the River Elbe, is a sensitive issue. This is why Poland should make special efforts to engage in co-operation formats that include EU member states from both sides of the former Iron Curtain.

Teamwork is about reciprocity. Poland can hope for as much recognition of its problems as it recognises the problems of other member states. Today, more than ever, we must be engaged in the technical, political, financial aspects of military and advisory missions conducted by the EU in various parts of the world. It would mean a great deal in this context if Poland stepped up its involvement in EUNAVFOR-Med, a military mission that is designed to combat the smuggling and illegal transport of people across the Mediterranean, and is therefore of paramount importance for the security of southern member states<sup>13</sup>.

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13 European Union Naval Force Mediterranean: an EU military mission launched in 2015.

## Second: Deterrence and Dialogue

Policy towards Russia must combine the logic of force and the logic of co-operation. The former is taken for granted after the events of 2014. It is commonly accepted, and indeed rightly so, that Russia only understands the language of force because that is what it uses. If you speak it, you had better have a powerful case. Poland has applied the logic of force by focusing on deterrence and preventing aggressive actions by our eastern neighbour. Major examples include the strengthening of the eastern flank of NATO and support for EU sanctions against Russia. However, limiting the policy towards Moscow to these measures alone is in fact equal to accepting the Russian perspective on international interaction. This perspective puts the highest value on the fight for domination, rather than on co-operation and mutual benefits for all parties. The European Union, and Poland in particular, should try talking to Russia not only using Russia's language, but also its own. This means being ready for maximum openness to using the existing principles of confidence-building (such as the Vienna Document mechanisms for the observation of military exercises)<sup>14</sup> and a pro-active policy of initiating and engaging in dialogue.

Meanwhile, the commitment to co-operation and dialogue must have solid, pragmatic foundations. The processes outlined in the first sections of the paper, that have led Moscow to aggression against Ukraine, call for caution while assessing any underlying agreement between the West and Russia in the political, economic and security dimensions. All appeals for the creation of a new European security order or the building of a common economic space from Lisbon to Vladivostok are far detached from reality today. Such initiatives only give rise to an illusion of normalcy, and do not solve problems but merely camouflage them. Therefore, dialogue with Russia should concentrate first and foremost on the difficult and conflicting aspects of the current situation. Given its geographic location, Poland should be a fervent advocate of debates on security in Central Europe, including discussions about the Missile Defence System and the presence of NATO in the region. Furthermore, Poland should be at the forefront of support for initiatives on mechanisms for building trust and transparency in the Baltic Sea region. Such debates may take the form of multilateral expert dialogue (with the participation of Germany, the USA or other partners). Openness to debates makes sense not only for logical but also for pragmatic reasons. Whenever Poland initiates dialogue, it will be well positioned to contribute to the selection of topics. Notably, the dialogue between Russia, the EU member states and NATO has continued all the time, and has risen in intensity in recent times. By excluding itself from the process, Poland and Polish experts are turning into outsiders at their own discretion, and leaving it to others to present the Western narrative in discussions with Russia.

## Third: Be Pro-active in the EU

Poland should brand itself in the EU as a country for which relations with Russia are a priority, and which has the ambition to be the co-architect of EU policy towards Russia. In order to do this, Poland will need to develop the skill of seeing these relations as part of a bigger picture that includes the perspectives of other member states and different mechanisms/dimensions for EU/Russian co-operation. **First and foremost, Poland cannot solely rely on a strategy of minimising EU engagement towards Russia at all levels. More intense EU-Russian interaction is inevitable in the immediate**

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<sup>14</sup> The Vienna Document on Confidence and Security Building Measures was adopted on 16 November 1999. It supplements and develops earlier editions of the agreements of 1990 and 1994. The document provides that information about conventional armed forces, including their organisation, weapons and defence planning, will be reported annually. This establishes an early warning system for specific types of military activity and verification mechanisms in the form of evaluation visits to military units, as well as the inspections and observation of military exercises. In addition, it establishes mechanisms for consultation to dissipate concerns that countries may have regarding irregular activity patterns of conventional armed forces. Source: [msz.gov.pl](https://msz.gov.pl).

**future, but it is vital that this process should not be chaotic or conducted in isolation by individual member states. Instead, it should be focused and coherent, so that it secures the Community's overall interests.** Now seems to be the right time to propose a debate on the subject within the EU. By doing so Poland could become one of the architects of the process, and avoid erratic and excessively radical decisions in the future.

The key step now will be to focus on providing broad funding to support personal interactions: youth exchange, university and NGO co-operation. Following the withdrawal of some US sponsors in recent years, European funding will be critical for the survival of many independent civil-society initiatives in Russia and some of the valuable non-governmental formats of co-operation between the EU and Russia.

Secondly, the future of EU sanctions against Russia must be considered. **The concept of maintaining sanctions until the Minsk agreements are fulfilled seems insufficient today. While the process of imposing sanctions gave unity and mobilisation to the EU, lifting them may have quite the opposite effect if the process is not well planned and agreed. A pro-active and creative reflection on the future of the Minsk process and sanctions is required in partnership with partners within the EU.** Such reflection must be cautious, and not necessarily conducted in public. The goal should be to develop a B scenario rather than exacerbating and escalating the differences within the EU. Further, the reflection should identify which provisions of the Minsk agreement are implementable at the given moment. When the time is ripe, a strategy of softening or possibly redefining the sanctions will be needed within well-identified EU priorities, so as to retain instruments of pressure on Russia if appropriate.

An active involvement in EU sectoral policies towards Russia will be instrumental for Poland. Sectoral policies include energy policy, competition within the common market, and a Common EU Security and Foreign Policy.

#### **Fourth: Unlock Communication Channels**

No Chinese-wall strategy is useful these days, and no mental walls (no travel, no interaction, no positive feelings) can protect us against anything.

On the contrary, excessive isolation carries social, economic and political losses with it. It breeds hostile stereotypes and hampers economic co-operation. Clearly, some reduction of high-level political dialogue is a natural consequence of every conflict. Still, sectoral dialogue can continue to further economic exchange, as well as interactions at the community level. The latter field should see some major mobilisation, given that Russia's relations with European Union and Poland are in crisis. It is a mistake to think that if our societies do not trust each other, there is no space for collaboration<sup>15</sup>. On the contrary, it only means there are huge challenges to be faced. This mindset is acceptable to Russian intellectual elites (they are relatively friendly towards Poland, and think well or even highly of us, but do not demonstrate it in public too much) and to a substantial group of Poles. In 2014, several months after the annexation of Crimea, 65 per cent of Poles assessed Polish/Russian relations as bad,

<sup>15</sup> In Poland, 22 per cent of respondents report a positive attitude to Russians, but as many as 50 per cent claim negative sentiments. *Stosunek do innych narodów*, CBOS, January 2015.

In Russia, when asked about the five countries that are most hostile towards Russia, 24 per cent of respondents indicate Poland. More hostility is perceived from the USA (72 per cent), Ukraine (48 per cent) and Turkey (29 per cent). Other countries assessed at a similar level of perceived hostility to Poland are Latvia and Lithuania. *Sayuzniki i Vragi Rosyi, Yevropeyskaya Integratsya*, Levada Centre, 2 June 2016

although 38 per cent of respondents said they want good relations to be maintained (in contrast, the figure was 34 per cent for other countries of the former USSR such as Ukraine or Georgia)<sup>16</sup>. Societies that interact are less vulnerable to top-down manipulation and mutual aggressive upheaval. Networking with opinion leaders helps understand Russia better, which is key for situational awareness and identifying possible options for co-operation. They create pockets of opportunity to present the Polish narrative.

Our ability to maintain bilateral dialogue is one way of building Poland's credibility in the EU. **The ability to keep the discussion going with a difficult partner is a sign of maturity and a capacity to share the responsibility for Russian/EU relations. The potential for communication is a form of insurance policy. Actually, communication with the right groups or individuals may prove absolutely essential in 'emergency situations'. Poland should work out its own 'insurance policy', so that it does not have to rely on the intermediation of others if the crisis hits the bottom.**

In light of the above, it is reasonable that selected institutions of intergovernmental dialogue and bilateral social-dialogue forums should be reactivated, including the Polish-Russian Group for Difficult Issues and the Civic Dialogue Forum, as well as support for youth, academic and cultural exchanges, and involvement in active public diplomacy in Russia and towards Russians. A significant role in sustaining and even broadening channels of communication with Russia can and should be played by the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding (CPRDU). Even if cooperation with its twin institution in Moscow is currently difficult, it is worth the Centre maintaining contacts with the widest possible range of people and opinions in Russia, including people representing views different than those prevailing in Poland.

### **Fifth: Strategic over Narrow Interests**

Strategic goals that should guide EU policies towards Russia should include: (i) ensuring energy security for all member states; (ii) responding to threats arising from Moscow's actions in relation to Eastern Europe and EU member states, and (iii) preventing divisions over interests towards Russia within the EU and NATO.

In a positive scenario – which seems rather unlikely today, albeit still worth considering – the strategic goal ought to be the restoration of confidence between Moscow and the West, the reconstruction of the security architecture in Europe, and ensuring mutual benefits from trade, tourism, infrastructure projects, etc. These goals are not just relevant for Poland alone, but indeed for the whole of Europe. The game with Russia is a team game; if we want to accomplish strategic goals, we must put short-term interests aside if they stand in the way. If we expect Italy, Spain, France or Germany to give up on their short-term gains in the name of common policy or to provide military support to countries in the eastern flank of NATO, we have to be ready for such concessions ourselves. This does not mean giving up on all bilateral issues. On the contrary, Poland has the right and should demand the return of the wreck of the presidential plane, defend competitive rules for Polish shipping companies, and work towards confirming the status of diplomatic properties.

There is possibly one issue that may clash with the EU's strategic goals and Poland's involvement in co-designing the EU strategy: the politics of memory. The escalation of the conflict of memory is beneficial for Russia as it needs a negative impulse to mobilise its society. As for Poland, such escalation is perceived by our EU partners as opening up new fronts, thus making things even more complicated.

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<sup>16</sup> *Polacy o stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich i polityce wschodniej Polski*, CBOS, Warsaw, May 2014.

Obviously, a 'cautious' politics of memory does not mean that the issues caused by the difficult past should be abandoned. It does mean, however, that the dialogue should be as non-political as possible, with much of the debate diverted to experts and historians rather than to emotional high-level polemics in the media. Excessive emotions in historical debates hinder Poland's participation in European policy debates. In order to play in the first league, we have to convince others that the likelihood of problems being solved rather than exacerbated will be higher if they work together with us.

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Policy towards Russia at a European level is a most difficult challenge. One has to assume that Moscow will not necessarily be keen on treating Poland as a partner. There are many individuals in the Russian administration who have deliberately sidelined our country to the role of an unconstructive peripheral player.

Despite that, or maybe exactly for this reason, Poland cannot afford to give up its active role in formulating Western policies towards Russia. It would be particularly dangerous in the face of a multilevel crisis in Europe that could make our allies possibly attach a lower priority to the Russian problem.

It is time that Poland joined the collective policy effort regarding Russia. It is in Poland's interest that Europe demonstrates its capability to defend itself against aggression and to de-escalate the conflict effectively, which will benefit both Poland and the European Community.

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**Stefan Batory Foundation**

Sapieżyńska 10a  
00-215 Warszawa  
tel. (48-22) 536 02 00  
fax (48-22) 536 02 20  
batory@batory.org.pl  
www.batory.org.pl

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