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FROM POLICY TO PRACTICE: INTERPRETING POLISH STRATEGIC CULTURE AMIDST THE RUSSIAN FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing developments in world politics provide new opportunities for transforming Poland's international image and brand. The world sees Poland as a more assertive and influential actor whose foreign and security policy is characterised as strategically thought-out. Indeed, Poland's national historical memory and geographical location determine the country's foreign and security policy arguably more than any other European state. Poland sees Russia as a neo-imperialist power, and the events of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine confirmed Poland's long-lasting security concerns that Russian revisionist ambitions might go beyond the Ukrainian borders. From the beginning of the full-fledged aggression in Ukraine, Poland has become the main advocator for rebuilding the Western community's capacity and willingness to get ready for the possibility of a high-intensity war in Europe. With this refocus on the Eastern Flank, Poland seeks recognition for its leading position in Central-Eastern Europe and a more powerful voice within the EU and NATO.

This research analyses how Polish strategic culture, composed primarily of the national historical memory of previous relations with Russia and perceiving it as a revisionist disruptive power, shaped the country's immediate firm and sweeping support of Ukraine in the first year of the Russian full-scale aggression. The paper argues that Poland's reaction to the Russian war of aggression of 2022 is a continuation of the country's long-time strategic line of countering Russian influence in Poland and Europe overall. Additionally, the war has confirmed other vital components of Poland's strategic culture, such as long-standing reliance on transatlantic cooperation in security and defence through NATO and the importance of the Polish-US relations to pursue its national interests. We believe the war boosted the resolution of Poland's overdue foreign and security policy concerns, providing the country with room for extraordinary decisions and more vocal positioning in the international arena. Therefore, Poland's strategic culture becomes a theoretical framework for understanding the main drivers for the policies Poland implemented in 2022 regarding Ukraine.

In the first part of this paper, we briefly describe the concept of strategic culture and its role in the analysis of policy- and decision-making in foreign and security policy fields. In the second part, we analyse the main components which shape Polish strategic culture and project it into the country's foreign and security policy. We consider

Polish-Russian relations, Polish-US relations, European and Euro-Atlantic integration, political culture, and Poland's active position in regional politics to be the key components of Polish strategic culture. Finally, in the third part, we examine the country's response to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in terms of foreign and security policy decisions implemented in the first year of the full-scale invasion and consider if and how they fit into the Polish strategic culture.

CONCEPT OF STRATEGIC CULTURE AND ITS ROLE IN FOREIGN POLICY-MAKING

Due to its relative novelty, the concept of strategic culture remains loosely defined and highly contested. The idea of including cultural notions in foreign and security policy analysis emerged in the late 1970s when discussing the USA's and USSR's approaches to defining the role of nuclear weapons (Snyder, 1977). This narrowly focused research stimulated further development of analysing foreign policy through social aspects and state-society relations in the decision-making process. In its broad and general sense, strategic culture implies the influence of the following components on state foreign and security policy: the historical experience of the relations with other states and, thus, long-standing traditional position on specific issues in world politics and its own practices of foreign policy; the political culture and prevailing political views in the society, general socio-economic capabilities of the state and thus the possibility to project its power in the international arena, and even the specifics of the state's geographical position.

The idea of the strategic culture has experienced several waves of reconsideration and reevaluation. The scholars of the first generation behind this concept focused on the Cold War events and the strategic cultures of the USA and the USSR (Snyder, 1977; Gray, 1981). Therefore, the approach was mainly limited to the states' military power and doctrines in terms of development and possible use of nuclear weapons. In the end, the approach did not receive much attention, as the conventional military warfare, the international developments at that time and traditional determinants of national interests, such as sovereignty and territorial integrity, demonstrated its relevance over the consideration of cultural constraints in the (possible) use of nuclear weapons. Therefore, even the developers and supporters of the concept agreed that the culture remained the "explanation of last resort" (Lantis, 2002: 103). Similarly, scholars of the second generation (the late 1980s) tailored their research to the analysis of how hegemony used culture as a tool to maintain their power (Klein, 1988: 3). The end of the Cold War entailed reconsidering the realist tradition of international relations and freed up the space for alternative theories and approaches. One of them was constructivism, which awoke active discussions on identity and social structures in foreign policy-making.

This paper focuses on strategic culture as a shaping context in which political agents act and make decisions. In other words, it is a specific "prism through which decision-makers view the strategic landscape" (Poore, 2003: 281). Therefore, strategic culture cannot directly impact decision-making and cannot be considered as a determinant of political decisions. However, strategic culture should be viewed as an explanatory factor, as it implicitly shapes the broader environment of decision-making processes.

We argue that the concept of strategic culture applies to analysing the state's foreign and security policy. As mentioned above, strategic culture, including national historical memory, traditional position in specific issues of global affairs or long-running policies and approaches, etc., become a particular context for policy choices, including those in foreign and security policy field, through the construction of the state's behaviour in the international arena. Moreover, the case of Poland represents an excellent example of how foreign policy is tightly connected to security policy and its strategic implications (ex., alliance and partnership building, enhancement of defence capabilities, political stance in international organisations, etc.). The concept of strategic culture takes its place in Poland's identity as an international actor. After that, these historical implications, specific political approaches, and even nationwide values are projected in core ideas that outline Poland's foreign and security policy.

POLAND'S STRATEGIC CULTURE AS A DETERMINATION OF FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY

Departing from the previously mentioned components for analysing states' strategic culture, we briefly describe the main features of Poland's strategic culture, which are essential for understanding its foreign and security policy choices. Indeed, all these components are interlinked and sometimes overlap, confirming how strategic culture should be used as context and environment for shaping foreign and security policy rather than one of the determinants.

Historical experience of the relations with other states. Historically, Poland's geopolitical location determines its foreign and security policy. From the 19th century till the end of the Cold War, the main security dangers for Poland were Germany and Russia (in the form of one state or another). These long-lasting existential threats and national memory from war times have formed the main junctures of Polish foreign and security policy and its understanding of national security objectives. The fear of a new possible invasion by a great power and consequent deterrence and prevention remain the key elements of Poland's strategic culture (Doeser, 2018: 5).

While Polish-German relations have experienced substantial improvement in the post-Cold War settings (Murphy, 2011), Russia remains viewed as a potential threat to Polish security and stability. National memory, particularly wars during the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth times, including the partitions of Poland (1772, 1793, 1795), the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939, and post-World War II inclusion of Poland to the communist block with the subsequent communist repressions have all together influenced modern Poland's position towards Russia. Indeed, the narratives about Russia's expansionist inclinations continue to play a predominant role in Poland's foreign and security policy. Poland actively condemns Russia's expansive politics and efforts to restore influence in the Post-Soviet Union space (*Polish Foreign Policy Strategy*, 2017: 2). Finally, this hostile perception of Russia has been clearly outlined in the latest National Security Strategy of 2020: "The most serious threat is the neo-imperial policy of the authorities of the Russian Federation, also pursued by means of military force."

At the same time, Poland can be related to the “Atlanticist” group of European countries (Mikulova, Simecka, 2013: 1192) that view the US as the key security provider in Europe through NATO mechanisms and emphasise the crucial need for the US military presence on European soil (*Polish Foreign Policy Strategy*, 2015: 8). It is explained by the fact that Poland’s national security interests directly depend on NATO’s capabilities to counter Russia in the case of any military or hybrid attack. Within the accession process, Poland developed and reformed its military and defence sectors, adopting NATO standards and enhancing its level of interoperability capabilities. For Poland, the US has become the leading strategic partner and the core foreign and security policy orientation. Notably, Poland hosts the highest number of US troops in Central-Eastern Europe, currently counting around 10,000 US personnel (US Department of State, 2022).

The long-standing traditional position on specific issues in world affairs and long-living foreign and security policy practices. First of all, based on its geopolitical position and historical feelings of injustice, Poland criticises the concepts of the “sphere of influence” in international affairs as one of the primary traditional practices of Polish foreign and security policy (Krasnodębska, 2021: 82). It aligns with the traditional anti-Russian stance, and consistent condemnation on the violation of the ruled-based world order by Russia in Georgia (2008), Ukraine (2014 and further 2022).

Secondly, since the end of Poland’s undemocratic regime, the country has generally stayed on solidarity, democratic order, the rule of law, and respect for human rights. Although, over the past couple of years, Poland has experienced a backslide in liberalism and a weakening of the national democratic institutions, the country stays on these democratic principles and inevitably shapes Poland’s foreign and security policy. However, this issue is related to the following components of strategic culture.

Thirdly, international subjectivity and recognition from Western countries have been paramount for Poland after its democratic transition (1989–1991). After the establishment of the Republic of Poland, its political elite reached a consensus on the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, as both the EU and NATO were viewed as guarantors of national socio-economic development and security assurances, particularly against Russia’s threatening influence. In the latest Polish Foreign Policy Strategy for 2017–2021, the support for both the EU and NATO remains present; however, there are concerns over the volatility of these structures and the potential damage to Poland’s national interests (*Polish Foreign Policy Strategy*, 2017: 2).

The EU gave the nation the tools and chance for a swift general development. The nation’s modernisation was made possible by EU subsidies and policies, in addition to new opportunities in the fields of education, trade, infrastructure, and communications (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016: 102). However, since the beginning of the Polish European and Euro-Atlantic movement, the EU was primarily seen as the way to improve the country’s overall socio-economic performance significantly. In contrast, NATO was seen as the only reliable tool to achieve security.

Consequently, concerning the EU, Poland’s support of the Eastern Partnership has become a country’s brand inside the EU (Bieńczyk-Missala, 2016: 105) for being one of the most active advocates of the EU East enlargement. It matches the eastward focus of Poland and its desire for leading positions in the region. While in NATO, Poland

has constructed its brand as a strong military power, a top defence spender in Eastern Europe with a pivotal geopolitical location, becoming a key part of NATO's deterrence against Russia (Kranz, 2022). Based on its historical experience, Poland fears abandonment by its allies; therefore, it needs strong and reliable security guarantees and modernised military capabilities (Doeser, 2018: 5).

Political culture and prevailing political views in the society. While political freedom and the right to self-determination are the main features of Polish political culture (Inglehart, Siemienicka, 1988) and remain relevant these days, the country's political culture has changed over the past years. One primary reason for the earlier mentioned backsliding in democracy has been the emergence of populist and nationalist tendencies in Poland (Dănilă et al., 2023). Since 2015, the governing Law and Justice party (PiS) has sought to alter Poland's political system on a structural level. Some ways they have done this include influencing media outlets, changing the boards of the nation's public enterprises, and modifying the legal system to remove institutional checks and balances (Przybylski, 2018). As stated explicitly by President Andrzej Duda upon taking office, PiS entered politics intending to use an "active historical policy" to "fight for historical truth in [its] relations with [its] neighbours" (Duda, 2015b in Cadier and Szulecki, 2020) in addition to "bringing necessary corrections" to Poland's foreign policy (Duda 2015 in Cadier, Szulecki, 2020). For the time being, Poland's decentralised political system continues to be the most significant obstacle to the nation's growing illiberalism (Przybylski, 2018).

Possibility to project its power. Contemporary aspirations and practical actions to have a stronger voice in regional decision-making, particularly within the EU and NATO, have proved to be long-standing traditional foreign and security policy positions. Today, Poland accumulates and projects its power and leverage differently, more firmly, through European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Krasnodębska (2021) makes a crucial point that Polish "Western" and "Eastern" foreign policy orientations are mutually dependent and reinforce each other. She summarises this assumption as follows: "The stronger Poland is in the East, the more influence it has in the West. Conversely, the more embedded Poland is in the West, the more it can shape international affairs in the East." (Krasnodębska, 2021: 82) Given its geographical location and highly advanced and modernised defence sector, Poland has self-recognised its leading role in Central Eastern Europe. Various multilateral, regional projects (Three Seas Initiative, the Visegrad Group, Lublin Triangle, and Eastern Partnership) have become the platforms for Poland to represent itself as the driver of regional development, security, and strategic stability. This is especially relevant for the EU's Eastern Partnership to ensure its peaceful and non-hostile security environment.

POLAND'S REACTION TO RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Undoubtedly, Poland has demonstrated its staunch and unquestionable support for Ukraine amid Russia's full-scale invasion of the country that started on February 24, 2022. First of all, this reaction fully aligns with the state's anti-Russian political stance

and historical hostilities, as discussed before. The country experienced the fear of the military threat it has been considering since 1989, once again confirming the rooted anti-Russian position in the strategic culture of the country.

Secondly, in line with the Polish key feature of reliance on transatlantic security and defence, Poland has been actively raising awareness among NATO allies and promoting the need for reinforcing the Eastern Flank (the US deployed around 5,000 soldiers to Germany and Poland in early February (Lubold, Youssef, 2022; Holston, 2022)). Indeed, NATO and defence cooperation with the US creates the central pillar of the Polish strategic culture within foreign and security policy; therefore, the immediate activation of Poland in this direction could have also been anticipated. Moreover, Poland started reinforcing its defence capabilities, particularly through a new weapon deal with the US at the cost of six billion USD (Judson, 2022). We argue that these conditions and Poland's immediate reaction to the Russian troops amassing exemplify how the country's strategic culture becomes an implicit context for political decision-making.

Thirdly, Poland has become noticeably active not only in the Central and Eastern European region but also within the overall European and Euro-Atlantic security and defence architecture. Indeed, Poland has substantially improved its actorness in a sense that its voice is more counted and more attentively considered in the European and Euro-Atlantic decision-making in terms of foreign and security policy.

In regards to the particular steps of the Polish government amid the Russian re-invasion of Ukraine, on the eve of the full-scale invasion, Poland's officials, including President Andrzej Duda, have been showing solidarity and readiness to provide assistance of any type. It was demonstrated through a series of visits (The First News, 2022b; Berezhnyi, 2022) when Poland announced its plans for weapons provision, including artillery and anti-aircraft weapons (Barbarani, 2022). The pursuit of Ukrainian topics on the agenda was less important during international meetings (Liga. Novyny, 2022a/b). President Duda took an exceptionally leading position in informing allies about the real danger Russia posed. Moreover, Poland facilitated a new trilateral security agreement between Poland, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom (Euromaidan Press, 2022). All these actions promised that Poland would take a principled stand in support of Ukraine in the coming war.

Warsaw has viewed Russia's war against Ukraine as an opportunity to meet Poland's foreign policy interests in several dimensions. First, an unequivocal victory of Ukraine lessens Russia's political influence and restrains its military power. It considerably reduces the risks of Russian aggression against Poland. Second, Eastern Europe's region historically presents Poland's most significant interest. The victory of Ukraine grants an opportunity to debunk all uncertainties about the region's role in European politics and stamp out narratives about the grey zone between Europe and Russia. Even more importantly, a stable and united region would create a balance of influence on the European continent. Third, the Russian war in Ukraine provides possibilities for deepening comprehensive Polish-US relations, which remains Poland's primary political orientation. Therefore, the impact of Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Poland's foreign policy is indeed a continuation of the previous line to reduce European dependency on Russia and strengthen the Eastern European region and relations with its staunch ally – the US.

Poland's response immediately after the start of the full-scale war was timely and vital. First, Poland has become the biggest host country for Ukrainian refugees (close to 3.5 million people) (Tyler, 2022). This success in managing many refugees and providing them with necessities has become an exemplary migration-management policy for Europe. Second, Poland accumulated enormous humanitarian aid for internally displaced Ukrainians. According to the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Poland has spent 175 million EUR on humanitarian commitments as of November 20, 2022 (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2022). According to the same source, the direct military aid provided to Ukraine totals 1.8 billion EUR (0.307% of GDP), including more than 240 tanks, about 100 armoured personnel carriers (Ukrinform, 2023), portable anti-aircraft missile systems "Perun," and BM-21 Grad multiple rocket launcher system (Malezyk, 2023). Finally, Poland has become the main corridor for ammunition transportation to Ukraine and a leading power in the negotiations regarding arms provision. One of the brightest examples was Poland's principal position advocating the need to provide Ukraine with German-made Leopard 2 tanks, an issue that became fiercely debated in early 2023 (Terajima, 2023).

In addition to that, Poland has traditionally been providing political support to Ukraine regarding its aspirations to join the European Union and NATO. Even before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy officially signed an EU membership application for Ukraine on February 28, 2022, Polish President Andrzej Duda called for providing Ukraine with an accelerated path to joining the European Union (The First News, 2022a). In the same way, Poland and eight other NATO member-states claimed their support for the Ukrainian future in NATO (Joint Statement, 2022) after President Zelenskyy signed the NATO application on September 30, 2022 (Ukrinform, 2022).

Despite providing ammunition to Ukraine, Poland has strengthened its own defence capabilities, first of all through procurement of the US weapon systems from its main security and defence ally (Ministerstwo Obrony Narodowej, 2022). Poland's main goal is to quickly boost Poland's defence capabilities and expedite the current military modernization plan. Moreover, Poland continues to reinforce its military personnel; as of the summer of 2022, the country plans to increase the Polish army to 300,000 soldiers by 2035 (Dziennik Zbrojny, 2022). As of 2021, the Polish army comprised 113,500 soldiers (Statista, 2023).

Despite its terrifying nature, the Russian full-scale war against Ukraine strengthened Poland's position within the Euro-Atlantic Community. Poland knew that its geolocation had become even more strategically important, and the country was ready to take the leading position in dealing with the aggravating conflict. Indeed, Warsaw took the opportunity to reinforce its diplomatic and military profile as a key regional player. Moreover, based on traditionally close relations, especially in the security sector, Poland became the main driving force in gradually reinforcing Ukrainian-American military cooperation (Tyler, 2022).

The events of the Russian full-scale war against Ukraine have been transforming European dynamics and have generated a tangible shift of influence for the decision-making from the West to the East. Warsaw has become a true advocate for securing Ukraine's unambiguous victory in the war and has repeatedly called for more active political, financial, and military support.

CONCLUSIONS

The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has intensified Poland's long-standing security concerns, prompting the country's robust response to the events. Considering Polish long-standing anti-Russian stance, specific focus on NATO as the only reliable guarantor of its security and defence and Poland's aspirations to confirm its leading role, specifically in the security and defence domain, in the Central and Eastern European region, the country has emerged as a leading advocate for rebuilding the Western community's preparedness for high-intensity conflicts in Europe, mainly focusing on the Eastern Flank. For its part, the country's strategic culture has become a specific background in which decisions are made, implicitly complying with the set of shared beliefs, ideas, and motivations.

To a greater extent, Poland's geographical and geopolitical location defines its foreign and security policy. A border with Ukraine, which has been at war with Russia since 2014, and a border with Belarus, a current Russian proxy state and the threat of the Kaliningrad exclave where the Russian Baltic Fleet with nuclear-capable Iskander system is based are all the determinants of Poland's foreign policy. As long as these geographical conditions are relatively stable and generally shared among the society, these seemingly realistic elements construct the perception of security and the favourable response a country should take in its relations.

In constant fear of Russia's potential neo-imperialist expansive policy, Poland has sought staunch and reliable security guarantors – the US and NATO. For its part, Poland provides strategic opportunities for NATO due to its geopolitical position on the Alliance's external border. The US perceives Poland's value similarly, viewing strategic utility for deterring Russia's adverse impact on the region. In addition to that, Poland also strengthens its defence capabilities.

Poland's foreign policy is characterised as timely since its leadership tends to feel the moment and take action that will favourably influence Poland's international position and promote its own interests. The case of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and Poland's response in the first year of the full-scale war of aggression becomes an obvious example of such a strategy. Indeed, Poland's active position in support of Ukraine facilitated a particular shift of the decision-making centre in Europe and the overall transformation of the European security posture with a more solid Poland position.

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ABSTRACT

This research analyses the key components of the Polish strategic culture, mainly the national historical memory of previous relations with Russia, the role of NATO in Poland's security and defence, the country's objective to become a leading power in the Central and Eastern European, and the concept of strategic culture can become an additional explanatory determinant of Poland's response to the Russian full-scale aggression against Ukraine. The case study considered Poland's immediate firm and sweeping support of Ukraine in the first year of the Russian full-scale aggression.

This article aims to understand essential determinants in modern Polish foreign and security policy and how they played out during the Russian war against Ukraine. The paper applies the strategic culture as an example of the critical theoretical approach to explain how historically-based context and specific national identical features influence decision-making in present times. The study used a systemic review of related literature, media coverage of the latest Russian war against Ukraine developments, and deductive analysis methods.

The central assumption is that the concept of strategic culture becomes a crucial explanatory factor in understanding policy- and decision-making processes in the field of foreign and security policy. The main conclusions of the paper are that Poland's response and reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine is a continuation of the long-lasting policy maintained by Poland regarding the elimination of military and hybrid threats posed by Russia, reduction of Russian influence in Europe, development of the Eastern European region and strengthening relations with its staunch ally – the US.

Keywords: Poland's foreign and security policy, Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine, strategic culture

INWAZJA ROSJI NA UKRAINĘ I JEJ WPLYW NA POLITYKĘ ZAGRANICZNĄ POLSKI

STRESZCZENIE

Prezentowany artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób kultura strategiczna kształtuje politykę zagraniczną i bezpieczeństwa. Przykładem empirycznym wykorzystanym w badaniach jest polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa Polski oraz analiza wpływu położenia geopolitycznego, tożsamości narodowej, doświadczenia historycznego i pamięci na zachowania państwa. Studium przypadku rozpatrywane w niniejszej pracy to wpływ pełnoskalowej inwazji Rosji na Ukrainę na politykę zagraniczną i bezpieczeństwa Polski.

Celem artykułu jest zrozumienie, które determinanty są najważniejsze we współczesnej polskiej polityce zagranicznej oraz jak cele polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa są ze sobą powiązane. Celami badania są decyzje polityczne i inicjatywy podejmowane przez Polskę w ostatnich latach oraz podejście strategiczne prezentowane w narodowych dokumentach strategicznych. W pracy zastosowano kulturę strategiczną jako przykład krytycznego podejścia teoretycznego w celu wyjaśnienia, jak historycznie uwarunkowany kontekst wpływa na podejmowanie decyzji. W opracowaniu wykorzystano systemowy przegląd literatury pokrewnej i przekazów medialnych dotyczących najnowszych wydarzeń w wojnie rosyjsko-ukraińskiej, a także metody analizy dedukcyjnej.

Głównym założeniem jest to, że wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska wzmacnia międzynarodową markę Polski jako wytrwałego i niezawodnego sojusznika na forach bilateralnych i euroatlantyckich. Głównym wnioskiem płynącym z artykułu jest to, że odpowiedź Polski na inwazję Rosji na Ukrainę jest kontynuacją długoletniej polityki prowadzonej przez Polskę w zakresie eliminacji militarnych i hybrydowych zagrożeń ze strony Rosji, ograniczania wpływów rosyjskich w Europie, rozwoju regionu Europy Wschodniej oraz wzmacniania relacji ze swoim zaufanym sojusznikiem – USA.

Słowa kluczowe: polityka zagraniczna i bezpieczeństwa Polski, wojna rosyjsko-ukraińska, kultura strategiczna, tożsamość narodowa