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## THE EASTERN POLICY OF POLAND: THE ROLE OF GEORGIA

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

148

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## **EXPERT OPINION**

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*“Eastern policy is one of the most important foreign policy dimensions of the Republic of Poland. It aims at active cooperation with former USSR countries such as Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. It is in Poland’s national interest that the peoples of its eastern neighborhood enjoy independence and security, and have the right to a sovereign choice of development path, political system and alliances. Those of them who decide on their pro-European and pro-Western orientation can count on Poland’s persistent help to achieve their goal”* (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2019).

### **Abstract:**

The purpose of this *Expert Opinion* is to identify the historical-political-economic motives of the eastern policy of the Third Republic of Poland (*Polityka Wschodnia*) and to underline the role that Georgia plays in this context.

In addition, the paper focuses on the state, which is one of the central actors in Polish eastern policy - Russia.

Another important part of the publication is dedicated to the analysis of the current threats that arise from the Kremlin’s actions - major national security challenges for the regional interests of Warsaw.

### **Historical Context:**

On June 4, 1989, when the first partially democratic elections were held in Poland, the foundation was laid for the III Republic.

As a result of the Yalta Conference, almost 40 years of forced membership in the socialist bloc (on the dark side of the Iron Curtain) led to the worst consequences for Poland: tens of thousands of citizens repressed and murdered by the communist regime, a cycle of systematic attempts to rewrite (distort) history, nominal sovereignty, a brutally persecuted Church, an economy in an unprecedentedly deep crisis...

If before World War II Poland was among the ten richest countries in the world in terms of the GDP per capita (Kokoszcyński, 2004), in 1990, given its catastrophic inflation rate and purchasing power parity, it was not even in the top 100 (Balcerowicz, 2012).

The harsh historical experience that the country gained as a result of its relations with Russia (Russian Empire / Soviet Union) is also noteworthy. Russian-Polish relations are very long, intensive and complex. You will hardly find a foreign state actor that has caused so much damage to Poland as the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union did.

The Polish-Russian historical antagonism dates back to the 15th century: war between Moscow and the Polish-Lithuanian Community (1492-1570). Then there was the first Polish-Russian war in 1577-1582, the second (1609-1618), the third (1632-1634), the fourth (1654- 1667), the fifth (1733-1735), the sixth (1768-1772), the seventh (1919-1931), the eighth (1939), etc. (Bohun, 2018).

Apart from these military escalations, the Kremlin divided Poland (rozbiór) three times (in 1772, 1793 and 1795). *“Although Prussia and Austria had participated in the disappearance of Poland from the world map, neither of them carried out such brutal repressions as the Russian Empire,”* says Renata Gałaj-Dempniak, a professor at the University of Szczecin (Gałaj-Dempniak, 2018).

The last part of the 1795 fragmentation resulted in the loss of independence for 123 years (Polska pod zaborami). In the history of Poland, the time came when not only independence was limited but almost every aspect of Polish national identity - language, literature, culture and religion. During the 123-year occupation, the Russian Empire brutally suppressed two Polish military revolts - in 1830-1831 (“November”) and 1863-1864 (“January”).

After the last rebellion, the 22-point multi-year plan of Russification was enacted. The plan included:

- Abolition of the formal autonomy of the Kingdom of Poland.
- Announcement of martial law for the next 50 years.
- Expulsion of thousands of Poles to Siberia.
- Appointment of Russians to high and average administrative positions throughout the country.
- Disappearance of the term “Polish” (Polski/a) from every private and public institution.
- Abolition of Polish higher education institutions and launching the mandatory teaching of the Russian language in schools.

- Prohibition of any contact with the Vatican and the Pope for representatives of the Catholic Church of Poland.

When Poland regained the independence in 1918, Russia (but this time Bolshevik) one more became the principal threat to the sovereignty of the Second Republic (II RP). However, Warsaw managed to maintain independence by defeating the Bolsheviks in 1921 (Bohun, 2018).

The existence of II RP continued for only 21 years. On September 17, 1939, on the basis of the Ribbentrop-Molotov secret pact, the Soviet Union attacked Poland from the east while Poles were resisting the Nazi German invasion on the west.

The tragic events of World War II (WWII) were particularly destructive for Poland. Apart from the human and infrastructural destruction, the Soviet secret services carried out a classified operation and slaughtered approximately 22,000 Polish officers (in Katyń and other Soviet cities). In addition, in those days more than 60,000 Poles were expelled from their homeland to Central Asia (Platajs, 2016).

To put this all into a nutshell, it is impossible to write about Poland's internal and foreign policy without a historical introduction because the above-mentioned events and Russia, concretely, determined Third Republic's (III RP) initial steps and its eastern policy.

### **Parallels with Georgia and Polish Conclusions:**

When talking about Poland and Georgia, we cannot ignore the phenomenon of the shared historical memory – the harsh historical lessons from Russia which further enhances the prospects of strategic cooperation between the two countries and the goodwill between the people. President Kaczyński always emphasized this fact and cited the example of the Georgian officers (Czech, 2008) who escaped Soviet occupation and served in the Polish Armed Forces in 1921-1939 (Kowalski, 2001).

As a result of the constant repetition of traumatic historical events, Russia, as a sharply negative foreign policy actor, has firmly established itself in the Polish national remembrance. Accordingly, one of the key aspects of Polish national identity was and is the adequate perception of the external enemy (Russia). In absolutely every field (school, university, cinema, sports, literature, art, diplomacy) Russia has always been a subject with a negative connotation ... even under socialism.

A no less important role was played by the Polish Catholic Church. As Anthony David Smith points out, the church is the cornerstone of the struggle for national identity and the freedom of oppressed nation-states.

Catholicism in Poland was extremely restricted when Russia violated the country's independence. Therefore, the Church has become a public pillar and the only mechanism for communication with the Vatican (West). Despite the heavy blows which Russia inflicted on the Polish Catholic Church, this institution was not weakened but vice versa - it was strengthened and became a source of inspiration for Poles in the struggle for independence. Based on this negative historical empirical experience, the Poles automatically associated the Church with the "window of freedom" which, conventionally speaking, "looked West." Along with the Solidarity Movement, the Catholic Church, led by John Paul II, played a major role in the cause of decommunization.

In a word, Russian Pan-Slavism could not gain a foothold in the Polish public perception and national identity which resulted in a continuous negative political-religious interaction with Russia and the tireless efforts of Polish public figures (Ignacy Paderewski, Roman Dmowski, John Paul II, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Stefan Wyszyński, Skubiszewski) created a kind of immunity which caused the ineffectiveness of Russian influence in the country.

This shared knowledge (that Russia is a direct challenge to the country's sovereignty) and the constant "repetition" of this empirical experience prompted all the authorities of the Republic of Poland to pursue a foreign and domestic policy that would minimize this threat. As a result, the Polish government is actively reducing each of the Kremlin's spheres of influence, continuing to rapidly minimize economic dependence on Russia and increase its defense capabilities.

### **Eastern Policy of the Third Republic and the Importance of Georgia:**

History and the harsh post-Communist political legacy have made Poland aim at reducing and balancing the Kremlin's influence in the neighborhood. It became a major challenge to the eastern policy and the national security of Poland. The fact that in Russia, the post-Soviet democratic euphoria ended very soon when former KGB members came to power is also taken into consideration (Ostrovsky, 2015).

The above-mentioned objective was considerably facilitated by the country's Euro-Atlantic integration and rapid systemic transformation. At the same time, another strategically important task was defined - the support of former USSR states - Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and Ukraine (Cziomer, 2015). In fact, the strengthening-democratic transformation of these countries could lead to regional stability and security (Wenerski, 2015). It is also noteworthy that despite a number of fundamental differences, none of the authorities of the Third Republic deviated from this foreign policy line.

Since 2004, another actor has appeared on the map of the eastern policy - Georgia. The country, which took a sharply pro-Western course as a result of the Rose Revolution and, thanks to effective reforms, soon became the focus of Western attention.

Many believed that Georgia was on the path of the systemic transformation that Poland went through in the 1990s. Of course, this hypothesis was very significant but other assumptions had a more solid meaning:

1. Georgia could be a source of inspiration in the South Caucasus - a region with a serious deficit of democracy.
2. The creation of a prosperous democratic state in Russia's immediate neighborhood would significantly weaken the Kremlin's position.
3. If Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration was achieved, the Eastern European wing would be strengthened.
4. A space free from Moscow's influence in the Caucasus would become a center of large-scale trade and economic initiatives.

Every above-mentioned issue is a declared element of Poland's national interest which is clearly underlined in each National Security Strategy Document: *"Take actions aimed at strengthening the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, including support for its efforts to fulfill its European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations and engage in stabilization activities in Poland's eastern neighborhood, including within the framework of the Eastern Partnership"* (Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2020, 25).

It should be emphasized that there is a firm position of Polish foreign ministers as well. Since 2007, every chief of Polish diplomacy (Fotyga, Sikorski, Schetyna, Waszczykowski, Czaputowicz) has been speaking



about the strategic importance of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration: *"For Poland, the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia and of other countries of the region, which have such ambitions, is a guarantee of long-lasting stability and economic, political and social growth of our partners"* (Czaputowicz, 2019).

*"Poland reaffirms its unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty"* (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2018).

Georgia is also very important for Warsaw from a geopolitical point of view as a transport corridor through which the transit of energy resources from the Caspian Sea is possible. The Baku-Poti-Supsa-Odessa-Brody-Plock-Gdansk pipeline is an example. In addition, in the future Georgia could become an integral part of the South Pipeline (3SI) which will significantly increase the energy independence of European countries.

A separate topic of conversation is the Eastern Partnership (EaP) which was initiated by Warsaw together with Sweden within the framework of the eastern policy for the political association and economic integration of Azerbaijan, Belarus, Ukraine, Armenia, Moldova and Georgia. The initial version of this format (the so-called draft version) was very ambitious and but due to Russian pressure, some Western member states supported the modification of the initiative (Korosteleva, 2017). The EaP platform was the most important tool for Tbilisi in establishing a visa-free regime and deepening trade relations with the EU.

Poland is also one of the main initiators of the sanctions against Russia in the international arena (in response to the Kremlin's aggressive policies in Georgia and Ukraine). In general, the current ruling team (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) consists of anti-Soviet dissidents, former members of the Solidarity Movement and prominent pro-Western figures. Consequently, no special argumentation or a search for a cause-and-effect relationship is needed in order to find out why this political force maintains a tough stance towards Moscow.

The best illustration of Georgia perceived from Warsaw and its significance are the words that President Kaczyński uttered in Tbilisi in August 2008: *"Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic States and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland."* (Kaczyński, 2008).

## Challenges and Tasks in the East:

Russia's unchanging eastern policy remains the main challenge for Polish eastern policy, threatening the national security of Warsaw and the stability of Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia (Strategia Bezpieczeństwa Narodowego Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej, 2020, 25). Direct interference (or attempts) in the internal affairs of these countries further increases the Kremlin's influence and the vulnerability index of the target states. In this regard, the main mechanism is propaganda - an integral part of Russia's foreign policy (Darczewska, 2014). The aim of the Kremlin's propaganda operations is to demonize the West, including Poland: by stirring up anti-Polish myths in Ukraine and by spreading the idea in Moldova and Georgia that Poland can "do nothing" in Europe.

On June 18, 2020, an article by Vladimir Putin was published in *The National Interest* in which the Russian President stressed that Poland was one of the main responsible states for the outbreak of World War II as a former ally of Nazi Germany (Putin, 2020). The next day, articles sharing this pathos appeared in various Georgian online publications. The meta-narrative was - yes, Poland is a friend of Georgia but it used to be an ally of the Third Reich.

Today, the main task of Poland in Georgia, on the one hand, is to neutralize propaganda, disinformation messages (first of all, about Poland itself) and, on the other hand, to deepen trade and economic cooperation with Georgia.

As for the more complex and global task that Poland has undertaken, it is the constant conviction of the Western states of the need to support Tbilisi's Euro-Atlantic integration and remind the international community of Russia's imperialist "nature."

In the new world order established after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is difficult to single out such a coherent state actor in the system of international relations as Poland which has been following the foreign policy line since 1989 that Russia is the main threat.

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