An unpredictable Russia: the impact on Poland

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As Russian domestic and foreign policy has evolved towards revisionism and an inclination to use military force, the concerns of Poland have been validated, which Warsaw voiced at a time when many other partners viewed Russia as the next candidate for successful transformation and Europeanisation. The vindication is a bitter one: in the coming years, confronting the new-old Russia will be for Poland not an exercise in theory of international relations but a struggle in which key security interests are at stake. In fact, Poland perceives the threat from Russia’s militarism and neo-imperialism as genuine, and as potentially going beyond the mere mid-level conflict scenario that Vladimir Putin needs to divert Russian society from its domestic problems and galvanise support for the regime. Polish political elites will prepare for a “war as diversion” as the most likely risk for the next few years, but they will also keep the “major war” option in the back of their minds.

Poland belongs to the group of European Union member states that will be most affected by an aggressive Russian foreign policy. Poland has a direct border with the Russian exclave, Kaliningrad Oblast, which because of its strategic location will remain the most militarised region in Europe. At the same time, Russia sees Kaliningrad as a vulnerable outpost because it is surrounded by the most “hawkish” NATO member states (Lithuania and Poland). If the Kremlin were to decide to have a local, short war with NATO, the Baltic Republics would be among the most obvious targets for Russian military aggression. And if the conflict were to escalate, Russia would probably want to neutralise Poland by occupying the Polish-Lithuanian border region (the Suwałki corridor) located between Kaliningrad and Belarus. Poland has the largest demographic, military, and economic potential of the countries on NATO’s eastern flank and is thus perceived as Russia’s main rival in the region. It also has the structural economic capacity to increase its power substantially. According to IMF projections, Polish GDP (PPP) is currently three and half times smaller than Russia’s. However, by 2030, this gap could decrease to a proportion of two-to-one in favour of Russia. Moreover, Poland is likely to maintain its military spending at its current high level (at least 2 percent of GDP) or even to
beef it up, since there is a rare consensus on the issue among the deeply divided Polish political elites. The Polish armed forces are undergoing a long-term and comprehensive modernisation process, which will in the next decade substantially enhance their military capabilities. Poland is also the main promoter of regional security cooperation on the North-South Axis from Scandinavia through the Baltic Republics, Romania, and Ukraine to Turkey.

The challenge by Russia in the Eastern Neighbourhood will affect Poland’s policies in multiple ways, beyond the military dimension. Ukraine remains a strategic issue for Poland – not just because of the need for stabilisation at Poland’s eastern frontier, but also because a well-governed and strong Ukraine would be an important ally that would change Warsaw’s strategic outlook. And energy policy remains a contentious issue, especially with regard to the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project; if the pipeline becomes operational after 2019, it could be a geopolitical game-changer in the next decade, increasing Moscow’s leverage in Eastern Europe. Historically, Russia’s fate has been intertwined with Poland’s security mostly in negative terms, and this is very unlikely to change in the next 15 years. Over the past 25 years, Poland has answered the Russian challenge by a decisive turn to the West, involving NATO and EU integration and building trust-based relations with its Western allies. In the period until 2030, the key questions for Poland will be whether this political and institutional framework will be (and will be considered as) sufficient to protect Poland’s interests, and whether Poland remains a partner to be reckoned with by other EU and NATO member states. In other words, Poland’s ability to minimise the costs of Russia’s rising unpredictability will be affected both by the disintegration process in the Western bloc and the EU and by domestic policy turbulence in Poland.

**The military challenge and the future of NATO**

Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) represents the testing ground for Vladimir Putin’s project to create a new world order. The mid-level conflicts expected to be at the centre of Moscow’s destabilisation strategy are seen in Warsaw not just as aggressions for their own sake, or as means to build up a siege mentality in Russia (even if this is their primary goal), but also as test balloons to assess the cohesion of NATO. And in light of this assessment, further steps may follow. Warsaw does not buy the argument that NATO’s conventional capabilities are 18 times stronger than Russia’s. What matters for CEE is that Russia’s military forces and equipment are ten times greater than the capabilities of the NATO member states in the region.
The Alliance’s strategic posture in the region is weak, insofar as Russia’s anti-access/area-denial capabilities could easily prevent NATO from quickly deploying its troops in a conflict situation. The argument goes that, if Russia is not sufficiently deterred, mid-level conventional conflicts could easily sweep across the NATO member states in CEE. Russia’s threat could become a reality in the short term: for this reason, a real and not symbolic strengthening of defence capabilities in the region is necessary as soon as possible.

The persistence of the Russian military threat in the years ahead may thus provoke Poland to open again the discussions about NATO’s eastern flank – a scenario that most allies would like to avoid. Already, Polish officials are maintaining that the July Warsaw NATO summit must form just “one step” in the Alliance’s strategic adaptation. Russia’s aggressive posture in the region will only enhance this Polish position and will feed into the debate about how the defence interests of Poland and other East European countries can best be served. There is a strong tendency in Poland to prioritise the bilateral security relationship with the United States over cooperation with NATO, as well as to count more on its own national defence capabilities than on the Alliance’s. A weak response to Russian aggressions and the general scepticism among parts of the West European public could push Polish public discourse and policy further in this direction.

**Ukraine and wider Eurasia**

As much as Russia’s military adventurism is perceived as a systemic and potentially existential threat, its destabilisation strategy in the post-Soviet region affects Poland’s strategic interests to an equally great degree. A weak or failed Ukraine is more than just an invitation for Russia to continue its aggressive policy and a discouraging example for Russia’s modernising forces: it could also be the source of a huge wave of economic or illegal migration into Poland. Several hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians have moved to Poland in recent years as seasonal labour workers, which has made a large contribution to the prosperity of the country. However, should Ukrainians lose the prospect of a better future in their own country, uncontrolled flows of huge numbers of migrants or refugees would put a strain on Poland’s labour market, social services, and relations within Polish society. A successful Ukraine, on the other hand, would provide Poland with more stability, economic opportunities, and security. It could also, as the traditional Polish approach in policy towards the East suggests, discourage Russia from its
attempts to rebuild the empire and/or even provoke positive political developments within Russia itself.

Ukraine is also the context within which the Nord Stream 2 project should be seen. European and Russian partners are likely to prefer the new Baltic pipeline to the transfer of gas through Ukraine to Europe, which will have economic and political costs for the region. Poland considers the geopolitical implications of Nord Stream 2 to be more important than potential economic losses, since Poland is successfully diversifying its gas supply. But Poland sees the pipeline as one of the instruments that Russia will use in the coming years to maintain control of its neighbourhood, particularly Belarus. The long-term strategic disadvantage for Poland and the EU is that reducing the gas interdependence between Russia and Ukraine (if the gas transfer through Ukraine were to be stopped) would likely raise the tensions between the two countries. The joint pipeline has had a moderating effect on Russian-Ukrainian relations, as it has forced the two countries to negotiate and compromise. It has also provided the West with a certain amount of leverage on the Ukrainian-Russian relationship, and Nord Stream 2 could take this instrument away from the West. This is why Poland is highly critical of Berlin’s support for the project.

Last but not least, a prolonged destabilisation and conflict between Russia and Ukraine would pose a risk to the Chinese project of the New Silk Road, in which Ukraine plays an important role. Poland is giving this project a lot of attention; forging closer economic ties with China is one of the priorities of Polish diplomacy. As Poland looks for new sources of economic growth beyond Europe and its relations with the eurozone/EU mainstream become strained, the Eurasian dimension of its foreign policy is gaining greater importance.

If Russia’s economic decline pushes the country more and more into China’s arms, Poland should expect a new geopolitical and geo-economic context to arise at its eastern frontier. China will become an increasingly important player in the Eurasian region, both a competitor and a “senior partner” of Russia. To confront this Chinese/Eurasian challenge (which will be not only an opportunity but also a risk), Poland will need to rely on more than just its own forces. Here, the nexus between Poland’s ability to pursue its interests in the East and its position within the EU becomes apparent. Strong and trust-based relations with the main EU partners will be necessary not only to respond to Russia’s military threat but also to design a sustainable
reaction to the changing geopolitical environment against the background of the expected expansion of Chinese influence in the Eurasian region.

**Poland’s domestic policy**

Poland’s response to Russia’s challenge may also depend on the way in which the domestic situation in Poland develops over the next decade. Poland is at a turning point at which its future political course is being determined: at stake is its model of democracy and political culture as well as its orientation within the EU. There is a worrisome similarity between the anti-Western propaganda of Law and Justice party leader Jarosław Kaczyński and that of Vladimir Putin. Closer attention should be thus paid to the way the populist right in Europe (including Kaczyński) positions itself vis-à-vis Russia in the coming years. Law and Justice is in a unique position: ideologically, it is closer to Putin than the party is ready to admit (considering things like nationalism, sovereignty, populism, conservatism, and the rejection of liberal democracy), but its electorate as well as Kaczyński himself are hostile towards Russia. (However, the Law and Justice hard-core electorate also has a relatively reluctant attitude towards Ukraine). Poland’s ability to successfully counterbalance Russia’s aggressive policy will mostly depend on its internal stability and its capacity to build coalitions in the international arena. In effect, the success of Russia’s hard-power-style policy in the region will depend to a large degree on Moscow’s ability to neutralise Poland by pushing it into isolation or destabilising it. Russia could achieve that by using various instruments: for example, through internet and media propaganda campaigns promoting pro-Russian or at least anti-Western political, intellectual, and social forces and opinions in Poland; through the instigation of internal political divisions in Poland; or by economic sanctions or embargos. Nevertheless, Russia’s economic pressure on Poland will most probably have a limited impact on the Polish economy. Bilateral investment ties between the two countries are very weak. Moreover, the most recent dramatic decrease of Polish-Russian bilateral trade, caused by the mutual EU-Russian sanctions and the crisis of the Russian economy, was relatively easily overcome by the Polish business community, which managed to diversify its commercial relations.

The fundamental differences in security policy together with deep mistrust towards Russia among Polish society make a Polish-Russian rapprochement unlikely. However, the anti-liberal course could complicate Poland’s relations with key EU members even further, resulting in Poland’s self-isolation and self-marginalisation, and in the worst case scenario, could even
push the country closer to Russia. In general, the evolution of the debate on liberalism/illiberalism and its political fallout within the EU will be an important variable in relations with Russia. The defence of Christianity and anti-Muslim and anti-Western sentiment provides for a common ground between Polish nationalists (not the mainstream of Law and Justice, but more radical groupings) and Putin’s propaganda, which opens an avenue for Russian infiltration and information warfare, even in such an unfavourable environment as Poland.

Should Poland’s current course away from the EU mainstream become a fixed feature of the country’s foreign policy orientation, it will have a negative impact on the ability to deal with Russia’s potential evolution towards more unpredictability and aggressiveness. With the US limiting its engagement in Europe, it will be up to the EU to formulate an adequate response. Polish-German relations will be crucial not only for Poland but also for the entire EU. The more nationalistic Poland becomes, the more difficult it will be for Warsaw to play the role of the facilitator of regional security cooperation, because the rise of nationalism will negatively influence Poland’s relations with certain neighbours (such as Germany, Ukraine, and Lithuania).

The risk posed by Russia will compete for Europe’s attention with other threats, such as migration and terrorism, most notably in the South. This will put Poland in an unfavourable position within NATO and the EU. Most EU countries will see Russia’s threat as less imminent (because it involves only medium-level conflicts) and will consider its fallout to be geographically restricted to Eastern Europe. In 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea and attacked Donbas, Poland’s narrative about Russia as the most direct threat to Europe’s security gained traction across Europe, for a while. But this is no longer the case, and it is not likely to be the case in future (unless Russia goes beyond the mid-level conflict scenario). Sanctions against Russia are seen by Warsaw as the key instrument to confront and to punish Moscow for its violation of international law, but a number of its partners consider them to be just a temporary tool forced by a negative confluence of circumstances. Most probably, as long as political negotiations between Russia and Ukraine do not bring tangible results, sanctions will remain in place. However, if the frozen conflict scenario in Eastern Ukraine becomes a permanent reality, Poland will struggle to gain sufficient support for a more assertive EU approach towards Russia, which will encourage Warsaw’s feeling of relative isolation within the EU.