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Russia Today: Neo-Imperialism and Crisis – The Polish Perspective

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- *Polish-Russian relations have never been good, but for the sake of European security and stability they should be improved, particularly in the time of a crisis which challenges the whole world.*
- *Russia under Putin started to rebuild its position as a regional superpower and began redefining its role in the world. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Poland and other countries of the region felt threatened by these signs of the revival of Russian imperialism.*
- *Today Russia stands on the crossroads where the neo-imperial ambitions, fuelled by the stream of petrodollars, meet the new reality of crisis. In such a critical situation the option of the state's disintegration cannot be ruled out. This would pose a direct threat to the countries of our region.*
- *The Obama administration offered a new, softer approach to Russia. This so-called "reset button policy" of including Russia as a partner rather than excluding or alienating it was warmly welcomed by the old EU member states. The Central European countries were more sceptical. President Medvedev's statement about the placement of Iskander rockets in Kaliningrad and the newly announced doctrine of building "the sphere of Russian privileged interest" ("the near abroad") deepened this distrust.*
- *The Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership Initiative can be a stimulating factor for building the stability and security in the region if both parties – the EU and the countries covered by the EP – treat it seriously enough.*
- *The international community should cooperate with Russia with a great dose of discretion, caution but also determination. If Russia wants to be a partner for Western democracies, Russia's leaders have to follow the set of widely recognised international standards.*

1. Polish-Russian relations: a geopolitical/historical perspective

The record of Polish-Russian relations has a clear devastating connotation. Since the time when the Russian empire and Polish-Lithuanian Kingdom – two emerging powers in this part of Europe – confronted each other over the domination of the region, history has noted numerous hostilities, conflicts and wars. When in the 18th century Poland lost its statehood, part of its territory was incorporated by Russia as a result of the partition deal with Austria and Prussia. After regaining its sovereignty in the aftermath of World War I, Poland was attacked twice by Russia (Soviet Union) in 1920 and 1939 (this time in an alliance with Nazi Germany). The Yalta accord, creating the new global order after World War II, made Poland a satellite state subordinated to the Soviet Union until its collapse at the end of the 1980s. Thus, it is not surprising that such a historical record generates a burden of negative emotions and prejudices. Although today's Poland is a member of the EU and NATO, this fatal Russian factor still plays an important role in shaping the mindset of Poles and influencing regional politics.

The Russian perception of Poland is also affected by the past hostilities, and one could say that Moscow has a Polish complex. The establishment of Den Narodnovo Edinstva – National Unity Day – in 2005 demonstrates it rather well. This holiday commemorates the national uprising led by Kuzma Minin and Dmitry Pozharsky, which ousted the Polish troops from Moscow in November of 1612.

It should be stressed that the Polish perception of Russia operates on two levels. The Kremlin and Russia's state institutions can be seen as a threatening factor or enemy, but there is no hostility towards the Russian people, who were often seen as the victims of an oppressive regime. The Polish collective memory remembers the cases of Russian democrats' support for the Polish uprisings against the tsar and his empire. Contrary to the stereotype of Polish Russophobia prevalent among the public opinion in Western Europe, most Poles are able to distinguish the system of power which implements the imperial policy from the Russian people at large. This could make a good grounds for the Polish-Russian reconciliation process (until now Poland managed to reconcile itself with Germans and Ukrainians), but without the involvement of the two countries' political elites such a process cannot succeed. A normal bilateral relationship based on trust is impossible without such reconciliation.

Now it seems that the present rulers of Russia are not prepared to launch a dialogue with the Polish side (this issue is not even at the bottom of their agenda). There are also some significant political groups in Poland which can react to such an idea with scepticism. However, Poles are generally interested in maintaining good neighbourhood relations with Russia, but under certain conditions. A good opening for improving the bilateral Polish-Russian relationship could be the genuine

cooperation of Moscow in fully explaining the case of the murder of 22,000 Polish officers by the Soviet NKWD in the Katyn Forest (1940). For most Poles Katyn became a symbol of the evil of the Russian/Soviet imperialism. If Moscow would be able to initiate talks with Warsaw over this crime, the way to the reconciliation process could be opened.

2. Russia's new political instruments and the rise of neo-imperial ambitions – consequences for Poland and the region

Russia under President Putin started to rebuild its position as the regional superpower and began redefining its role in the world. After crashing the Chechen uprising with a brutal violation of human rights, Vladimir Putin soon became an important partner for the US and the EU (in fighting terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism and in securing the energy supply to the then booming EU economy). By regaining the full control of the state structures, he secured his leadership position and then passed the presidential office to Dmitry Medvedev. Throughout the last years Russia became an authoritarian neo-imperial country with a state controlled media, dying NGO sector and marginalised, oppressed opposition. The journalists who tried to investigate the cases of corruption and state crimes were killed by unknown assassins in mysterious circumstances, and the oligarchs opposing the regime had to flee the country or were arrested and then sent to a penal colony (as was the case with Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the founder of Yukos oil company).

Benefiting from the economic boom and high prices of energy, Russia claimed to soon become an equal partner of the United States, weakened by its involvement in two wars. The EU was not even considered to be any serious competitor to Russia. The Kremlin knew well how to play the game of splitting European unity. Pro-Kremlin experts promoted a vision of Moscow and St. Petersburg quickly becoming the new financial centres of the world.

The new political instruments were invented and successfully tested:

- Energy – gas & oil as tools for political/economic expansion (gas conflict with Ukraine)
- Frozen conflicts – as a tool for justifying military intervention under the pretext of protecting the rights of minority group/Russians or their allies (war in Georgia).

Moscow began using military rhetoric in its political statements and manifested its newly regained power (the visit of Russian warships to Venezuela, renewing its relations with the Castro regime, making territorial claims to the Arctic, and announcing the establishment of CIS rapid reaction task forces as counterbalancing NATO and the return of the Russian navy base to the Mediterranean). All these steps greatly resembled the old Soviet style politics.

It is not surprising then that Poland and other countries of the region felt threatened by these signs of Russian imperialistic revival. As a result, Poles and Czechs soon inked an agreement with the US for hosting the elements of an anti-missile shield on their territories. In response the Russians blackmailed the West with a prospect of installing Iskander rockets in the Kaliningrad oblast. The Balts, Poles and other Central European nations began asking "difficult questions" about NATO Charter's article 5 and scenarios for defending this region against a possible attack from the East. Poles negotiated with the Bush administration that the battery of the Patriot defence system would be stationed on Polish soil. Moscow spoke about defending its "sphere of privileged interest" in the region. The spirit of a new Cold War lingered in the air. But today's neo-imperial Russia has no real allies in its closest neighbourhood. Until now, even Belarus did not recognise the independence of the Russia-backed separatist republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

3. Economic crisis targeting Russia

Nowadays, Russia stands on the crossroads where the neo-imperial ambitions, fuelled by a stream of petrodollars, meet the new reality of crisis. For Moscow it is a painful process to acknowledge that the cherished dream of becoming a global superpower is over. The unemployment rate is drastically growing, the economy is shrinking, and the national bank is defending the weakening ruble by pumping hard currency reserves into the financial sector. Disillusioned Russian people have begun to express their frustration and anger in spontaneous protests which have been shaking the country from Vladivostok to St. Petersburg. The international media have started speculating about the split between Medvedev and Putin over dealing with the crisis. Rumours are spreading about the growing opposition to Putin within the inner circle of power.

It seems that soon the budget of Russia could be unable to meet its obligations and to pay international debts, people's salaries and pensions. In such a situation the scenario of the state's disintegration cannot be ruled out. This will pose a direct threat to the countries of our region. In the past Russia demonstrated to the world that in the time of crisis the preferred solution is to find an outside enemy who could be blamed for all problems and then to unite people under the patriotic slogans about defending national interests.

Having this in mind, the international community should work with a great dose of discretion, caution but also determination. It has to be clear that if Russia would like to become a partner for the Western democracies, its leaders have to follow the set of widely recognised international standards.

4. Poland's perception of the EU and the US policy towards Moscow

After the Russian invasion in Georgia, the West reacted almost unanimously by condemning Moscow for its actions. Not the US, but the EU and the French president Nicolas Sarkozy played the major role in brokering the peace negotiations. Russia was singled out as the aggressor, NATO suspended the NATO-Russia Council, and EU-Russian relations were frozen. Poland managed to use this momentum for signing the agreement with the Bush administration on hosting the anti-missile shield on its territory in return for the US promise to send a battery of Patriot rockets as Warsaw has requested. This deal sent a clear signal to the outside world that Poland sees Russia's neo-imperial policy as a threat to regional security.

A new chapter in the American policy towards Russia was opened by the Obama administration, which offered a new, softer approach to Russia. The message is that the US might reconsider the plans for installing the ABM shield in Central Europe if Moscow helps stop the nuclear programme in Iran. This so-called "reset button policy" of including Russia as a partner rather than excluding or alienating it, was warmly received by the old EU member states. An important issue of the Western agenda was arms control and the prospect of signing a new nuclear non-proliferation treaty with Russia.

The Central European countries (especially Lithuania) were more sceptical of this new policy. For them this "inclusion" meant a repeat of the same tactics towards Russia which did not work in the past. The media reported that such a split of attitudes towards Moscow significantly lowered the chances that Radoslaw Sikorski, the Polish Foreign Minister, would be appointed to the post of NATO Secretary General. Berlin and Paris agreed that the appointment of a Pole would send a wrong signal to Moscow.

5. German-Russian relations – the Polish context

Warsaw closely monitors the development of the Moscow-Berlin relationship. History has proven that a German-Russian alliance has always created problems for Poland. The attitude of opposition party leaders (PiS – Law and Justice party) towards Berlin is openly critical. The ruling coalition's approach became more sophisticated. Tusk's government managed to reset the inherited, almost frozen Polish-German relations. Through paying one of his first visits to Moscow he also demonstrated to the partners in the EU his good will for improving Polish-Russian relations. Although he passed the test of being open to a dialogue with the Kremlin, the war in Georgia soon altered the Polish priorities.

Moscow's intervention switched on the red alert lamp, reminding Poles that not so long ago Poland was forced to become a Soviet satellite. Medvedev's statement about installing Iskander rockets in Kaliningrad and the newly proclaimed doctrine of building "the sphere of Russian privileged interest" ("the near abroad") deepened the distrust, and when after the last gas crisis Berlin began insisting on launching the German-Russian Nord Stream gas pipeline project, Poland's immediate reaction was to obstruct this initiative as threatening its national interest. As a matter of fact, since the very beginning there was no disagreement on this subject between the opposition and the ruling coalition in Warsaw.

Berlin's move of promoting Nord Stream also met with a very cold welcome in Sweden, a country which together with Poland proposed the Eastern Partnership Initiative (EaP). In spite of earlier fears that Berlin and some other old EU countries might block the extra funding already promised to finance the Eastern Partnership (which would result in lowering the political impact of this initiative) an important decision has been taken to earmark 600 mln Euros for the project. This will not make Russia happy, because all the countries covered by the EaP fall under the terms of Moscow's new "near abroad" definition. While Germany advocates the policy of "not excluding Russia", Warsaw is in favor of "including" it but under certain conditions, such as the recognition of the right of all countries to determine their alliances and select their friends. This basic right is definitely contradictory to the "near abroad" philosophy of Russia.

6. Poland and Ukraine as frontline players

For Poland, Ukraine is a strategic partner in Eastern Europe. The success of democracy in neighbouring Ukraine means for Warsaw regional stability and secure borders. These objectives determined the Polish support for the Orange Revolution and backing for the EU and NATO aspirations of Kyiv.

Russia's view of Ukraine differs from the Polish one. Moscow sees Kyiv as the "nearest neighbourhood", an immanent part of the Russian civilisation which should be returned to the motherland. For Russians, the Western Ukrainians with their UPA tradition are the followers of fascism and traitors. Since the time of Ukraine's independence Moscow tried to regain its influence over the former Soviet republic by using different means. The Orange Revolution ended with a spectacular failure of Russian diplomacy. Then the Russians began using a new range of instruments, such as gas cut-offs, corruption and black PR, whose effectiveness is hard to assess. Today Ukraine is in a deep political and economic crisis, which could undermine the functioning of the state. The deepening chaos might push Kyiv closer to Moscow. In such a situation the EU should show more determination in keeping Ukraine on its westward path because this is essential for a more secure and prosperous Europe.

Poland as an EU border country has a crucial role to play in this process. Warsaw's policy towards Ukraine should be more proactive and has to respond to the new dramatic challenges facing the region. But in order to be effective, such a policy also needs the backing of larger old EU member states and a blessing from Brussels. The Polish-Swedish Eastern Partnership Initiative can be such a stimulating factor if both parties – the EU and the countries covered by the EP – treat it seriously enough.

7. Conclusions & Recommendations:

- Russia is not a strategic partner for Poland, but it is a strategic partner for the US and the EU, and this fact should be recognised by Polish policy makers.
- Poland, as the largest Eastern EU border country, should elaborate and start implementing a regional long-term strategy towards Eastern Europe and Russia based on the EU/NATO principles and consensus worked out between the main political parties. Such a strategy should take into consideration all possible scenarios of developments.
- Poland should build its relations with Russia through working with EU and NATO countries, constructing regional coalitions of interest (which will not harm the unity of the EU and the Transatlantic Alliance).
- The EU and the US should take into consideration different scenarios of developments in crisis-stricken Russia. The West should elaborate plans for assisting Moscow in overcoming the economic crisis if the Russian leadership decides to give up neo-imperial ambitions and open the country to democratic reforms. However, if Russia's leaders choose the conflict scenario, the EU and the US should be prepared to defend democracy in the region and to confront the militant position of Kremlin.
- Warsaw should work with its European and American partners to help strengthen the position of NATO in the region.
- The Polish policy towards the Eastern European countries should comprise the wider regional dimension stimulating these countries' cooperation under the framework of EU initiatives such as the European Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, and Black Sea Synergy.
- Priority should be given to strategic cooperation with Ukraine, especially now in the time of deep economic/political crisis that Kyiv faces. In spite of the "Ukrainian fatigue syndrome" Warsaw should continue its support for Ukraine's Euro-Atlantic ambitions for the sake of regional security and stability.
- The energy security issue is high on the Polish agenda due to its dependence on the Russian supply and the transit route to the EU. Poland should strongly promote the concept of the EU common energy policy based on solidarity and diversification.

- The bilateral Polish-Russian relationship should be based on an internationally recognised set of values. At the same time, these days priority should be given to such non-controversial issues as economy/business/human exchange.
- Warsaw should promote among its Western partners a dual approach to Russia: working through official government channels but also trying to reconstruct dialogue with marginalised opposition and civic groups (this field was basically given up and the West concentrated only on one-way contact with the Kremlin). Human rights issues should again become an important part of the agenda for dealing with Moscow.
- The Polish NGO sector should obtain government funding for maintaining the partnership contacts with Russian organisations and cross-border projects should be launched, stimulating the exchange of opinions and promoting democratic values throughout the region.
- Poland should continue working on the issue of the Polish-Russian dialogue, which – in the long term perspective – could open a way for the reconciliation process. Such a dialogue should be conducted on two levels: governmental and civil society (which at the moment is very weak and marginalised in Russia).
- The Katyn massacre issue's deadlock should not become an obstacle to progress of the Polish-Russian dialogue, but it should be made clear that the full explanation of this crime is a pre-condition for maintaining the normal, neighbourhood relationship based on mutual trust.

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