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THE EASTERN POLICY OF POLAND SINCE THE OUTBREAK OF WAR IN UKRAINE: THE DIRECTION OF GEORGIA

GRIGOL JULUKHIDZE

193

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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The purpose of this publication is to analyze the transformation that Poland's Eastern policy underwent after the start of the war in Ukraine. Georgia has an important place in these changes as an important partner and ally of official Warsaw. In the aforementioned context, the opinions expressed in Poland about the present and future prospects of our region are particularly noteworthy and significant.

Past and Present:

The East is a critically important element of the foreign policy of the Republic of Poland. It is known as the Eastern policy (*Polityka wschodnia*) and consistently aligns with the country's global or regional challenges.

According to the vision of Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs for 2019, the goal of the Eastern policy is cooperation and deepening relations with former Soviet republics (Belarus, Ukraine, 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).

From 2019 to the present day, a lot has changed in the world: the system of international relations has been transformed, the global security architecture has been reshaped, post-Cold War approaches have been revised and Poland itself has also changed. The main reason for all of this is the full-scale war started by Russia against Ukraine.

After Vladimir Putin announced the start of the *"special operation"* to the world on February 24, 2022, official Warsaw started to act immediately. The purpose of this force majeure mission was to **save Ukraine, provide effective military assistance to Kyiv and stop the expansion of the Kremlin**. The immediate fulfillment of these three points has become the main task of the country. To cut a long story short, the Eastern policy of not only Poland but also the collective West has changed.

It is wrong to make predictions while the war is going on but today, as this article is being written, it can be said with certainty that **Warsaw has achieved its goals in the short and medium terms**.

- 1. To save Ukraine:** Poland received 7.937 million Ukrainian refugees (Straż Graniczna, 2022). As of October 2022, the Polish government spent PLN 5.5 billion on humanitarian support for refugees (accommodation, food, medical care, education, social security, transport) and PLN 8 billion on local self-governing units (Kacprzak, 2022). Despite the catastrophic devaluation of the Ukrainian currency, the National Bank of Poland continued to purchase the *hryvnia* at the pre-war rate and allocated PLN 4 billion for its financial stability (Narodowy Bank Polski, 2022). According to the most modest data, ordinary Polish citizens spent more than PLN 10 billion to help Ukrainians fleeing the war (Cielak-Wróblewska, 2022). Poland's foreign policy was completely reorganized and lobbying Ukraine using the European Union, NATO, the United Nations and various international platforms became the top priority. All this gave the Ukrainians a chance to breathe and continue the fight.
- 2. To provide effective military assistance to Kyiv:** Since the start of the war, the Kiel Institute for the World Economy has launched the Ukraine Support Tracker (UST) project. The UST calculates and analyzes the military, financial and humanitarian aid that Ukraine has received from allies since February 24, 2022. The database includes 40 countries: EU member states, the United States of America, Canada, Australia, South Korea, Norway, New Zealand, Taiwan, etc. According to the October 2022 data of the Kiel Institute for the World Economy, Poland is in third place in the UST ranking (Kiel Institute for the World Economy, 2022). Officially, Warsaw provided military aid worth PLN 8.585 billion to Kyiv. Krab self-propelled howitzers, Piorun, GROT carbines and RGP-40 grenade launchers deserve special mention. Equally important is the cooperation in the provision of secret and intelligence information. In this sense, Poland is an active contributor to Ukraine, along with the United States of America and Great Britain.
- 3. To stop the expansion of the Kremlin** is the main task of Poland's Eastern policy whose necessity has been significantly accelerated by Vladimir Putin's neo-imperialist actions. Today, we can unequivocally state that Russia's military aggression on Ukraine geometrically increased Poland's political weight and international authority. If in the past the calls of official Warsaw to take a principled position in relation to Russia were perceived as paranoia by many Western states, today the situation is radically different. Poland's arguments were justified. Thanks to its growing economic and military potential and strategic partnership with

the United States of America, the role of this Eastern European state has become even more important. With the effective use of separate regional platforms (Three Seas Initiative, Visegrad Four, Bucharest Nine, Lublin Triangle) and by deepening relations with NATO, and thanks to a society antagonistic to Russian imperialism, Poland successfully manages to limit and reduce the Kremlin's influence in Central and Eastern Europe. Concrete proof of this is the common position of Poland, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania and Sweden in relation to all issues related to Russia. As the role of Polish diplomacy grew, the voice of official Warsaw became more important. Consequently, the call for "more sanctions on Russia!" is less and less perceived in the West as "Russophobia" or "Eastern European paranoia" on the part of the Poles. By the way, despite deep internal political polarization, the Polish Senate was one of the first in Europe to unanimously support the recognition of Russia as a terrorist regime (Kostrzewa, 2022). Apart from diplomatic means, Poland is actively trying to reduce and neutralize Moscow's economic and political influence. Between February and November 2022, the Polish Security Bureau (ABW) arrested about 100 spies working for Russia or Belarus (Agencja Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego, 2022). Based on the findings of the ABW, the Ministry of Energy and Development imposed forced administration on PAO Gazprom and transferred all of its assets to Europol Gaz (Stec, 2022). Around 200 citizens and companies were sanctioned (Ministerstwo Spraw Wewnętrznych i Administracji, 2022). Poland opened a new canal, Kanał przez Mierzeję Wiślaną, which will connect the Vistula Lagoon with the Gulf of Gdansk, thereby enabling ships to bypass Russia and enter the port of Elbląg (Wierzbicka, 2022). Poland increased its defense budget to 3% of the GDP/97.445 billion PLN (Sejm, 2022) and signed a USD 5.8-billion contract with South Korea to receive F-50 fighter jets, K2 tanks and K9 self-propelled howitzers. From 2023, Warsaw will no longer purchase even one cubic meter of gas from Russia.

Long-Term Perspective:

Russia's aggression in Ukraine significantly changed Poland's Eastern policy or rather accelerated it in some ways, turning what seemed like a distant prospect into a necessity demanding urgent action.

The goals achieved in the short and medium terms still do not guarantee future success, especially in the dynamically changing modern world. Applications made by Ukraine, Moldova and **Georgia** for joining the European Union and the new geopolitical context formed as a result of the war created the need for a new initiative in Poland's Eastern policy. **In Warsaw, it is well understood that the offer of the status of a candidate country for the European Union is not enough today because it has little practical value (as the experience of the Western Balkans shows). Yes, it is an important but still symbolic gesture that can quickly end in disappointment (look at the EU's enlargement policy which is de facto frozen). More and more Polish experts are talking about the fact that Poland should take an initiative that will go beyond the Eastern Partnership. After all, this mechanism has already exhausted its function and is no longer the main tool of Eastern policy. For Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, the promise of EU membership is only the first step. On the other hand, the path of integration is full of obstacles: legal, political and economic. Therefore, it will be crucial to prepare specific offers while tangible intermediate "rewards" are also in place. The countries associated with the European Union (Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova) should receive: the prospect of joining the European Economic Area (EEA) in this decade, partnership in energy and climate policy, strategic security cooperation and strong economic support. And most importantly, this goal can in no way be an alternative to full membership.**

Poland, with its increased political weight, certainly has the resources to initiate such an ambitious plan which would give these countries a realistic, measurable perspective of a very strong connection with the EU and, at the same time, open up the possibility of full membership. Representatives of the Polish political elite have repeatedly pointed out that the new integration guide should be combined with the post-war aid plan and Ukraine's subjective aspirations: increasing defense capabilities, economic development, writing off international credit obligations to official Kyiv, technological support, etc. (Bendyk and Buras, 3-5, 2022).

In the near future, Poland will become a country where we will feel the long-term consequences of the war in Ukraine very acutely. It concerns security, migration and energy transformation challenges. But, in the long run, all of this will bring Warsaw closer to Brussels as it will be even more interested in increasing solidarity within the EU.

Issue of Georgia:

Due to the existing challenges, the priority of Poland's Eastern policy is to support Ukraine. Thanks to its geographical location and President Maia Sandu's pro-Western course, Moldova is in the same dimension which has another active lobbyist, ethnically-culturally related Romania. In the case of Georgia, the situation is radically different. This Eastern European state does not have a favorable geopolitical location nor does it have an influential related nation-state in its neighborhood. Accordingly, Tbilisi is betting on deepening ties with strategic partners (the USA, Great Britain, Poland and the Baltic states).

All of this is well understood in Warsaw. By the way, despite the geographical distance, almost similar history and having experienced the harshest lessons of Russian imperialism, Georgians and Poles are already connected by a special spiritual interdependence. In addition, the short but intense cooperation between the Second Republic of Poland and the Democratic Republic of Georgia is worth noting. All of this creates favorable ground for official Warsaw to be positively represented in Georgia which they successfully do. On the other hand, Georgia is also becoming interesting for Poles which is evidenced by the increasing number of Polish tourists coming to Georgia, the number of Georgian restaurants in Poland, wine exports and active business cooperation.

The Georgian direction of Polish Eastern policy is focused on increasing political support. The proof of this is the visits of high-ranking Polish politicians to Georgia. In 2021–2022, President Andrzej Duda visited Georgia twice and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki and Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau each visited once. Most importantly, the goals of the aforementioned visits and political support are fully consistent with the declared priorities of Georgia:

- Continuation of the policy of non-recognition of the occupied territories of Georgia;
- Support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations;
- Increasing the international role of Georgia by including it in economic projects of regional and continental importance (including bypassing Russia and creating new energy corridors with partners);
- Fight against Russian propaganda;

- Raising the qualifications and increasing the capabilities of the Special Operations Center of the Defense Forces of Georgia;
- Improvement of Georgia's economic potential;
- Support for the civil sector of Georgia (Ministerstwo Spraw Zagranicznych, 2017).

It was in response to this fruitful cooperation and the increased role of Poland that pro-Russian organizations became active in Georgia. Between February and November 2022, more than 25 disinformation narratives about Polish history and foreign policy were spread by anti-Western forces. The goal of such operations is to instill a negative attitude toward the object state in the local society (Julukhidze, 2022).

Georgia is important for Poland. Even the following statements show this: *“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).

“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).

In this new reality, Georgia's rapprochement with the European Union is even more important for Poland. On the one hand, this will reduce Russian influence in the South Caucasus; on the other hand, it will create a precedent for success in such a complex geopolitical space where after the second Karabakh war, the deficit of democracy (and the West in general) has significantly increased (Hedlund, 2021).

Warsaw's support for Tbilisi on the way to NATO integration became even more comprehensive. The President and Prime Minister of Poland have repeatedly pointed out that in this changing and complex geopolitical reality, Georgia's place is in the North Atlantic Alliance. But the main issue and challenge is to what extent Georgia will be able to use the opportunities arising from the combination of these geopolitical variables.

Yes, all of this is in Poland's national interest but the stakes are much higher for Georgia as failure could threaten not only Euro-Atlantic integration but its sovereignty as well.

It is difficult to determine what will change in the future and where the fate of Eastern Europe will go but we can say two things for sure: Russia will continue to weaken due to the difficulties caused by the war and Georgian-Polish relations will deepen even more. Both of them show the prospects of a better future.

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