

POLAND AS A FRONT-LINE NATION IN THE WAKE OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION IN UKRAINE

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Abstract. The outbreak of Russian aggression toward Ukraine has created an existential threat for Poland, including a reminiscence of the historical struggle imposed by the Russian Empire and Soviet Russia to safeguard sovereignty. The war has further transformed the perception of the Russian Federation into seeing it as an aggressive nation striving to recreate its spheres of influence. This has been seen especially over the last two decades. This paper* will discuss specific aspects of Poland's evolution of awareness of Russia as an aggressive nation using military forces to change existing national borders, violating international law and human rights principles, and committing war crimes against the civilian population. This paper is based on official documents and current data about the conflict, but it also reflects changes in Polish public opinion and military support for Ukraine when fighting for freedom and sovereignty.

Keywords: War in Ukraine, Poland, Russian Federation aggression, NATO Eastern Flank

1. Introduction

For Poland, Ukraine is a very important nation, and it has many dimensions. Historically, Poland was the first country to recognise Ukraine's independence in 1991, followed in 1992 by the signing of a Treaty on Good Cooperation and Mutual Neighbourly Relations.¹ Both nations share a history linked with facing similar pressure from Russia's interventions and its desire to build an empire. This included a constant drive from Russia to expand territorial gains and extend national borders. Both nations were, in respective parts of their

* The opinions expressed in the paper are the author's personal stance and do not reflect the official position of the Baltic Defence College and its Framework Nations.

¹ **Poland and Ukraine – Thirty Years of Partnership and Friendship** 2022. – Warsaw: Website of the Republic of Poland 18 May 2022. <https://www.gov.pl/web/southafrica/poland-and-ukraine---thirty-years-of-partnership-and-friendship> (15.11.2022).

history, part of the czarist empire or the Soviet Union, embedded into it or existing as fully dependent entities. Geography is another important factor as the Polish-Ukrainian border is 535 km long, naturally making Ukraine a buffer zone between Poland and the Russian mainland. This aspect is of great importance from a security point of view and the current war is proving this factor. The war in Ukraine has undoubtedly shown that the threat the Russian Federation is posing toward its close neighbours is no longer just imaginary; it is based on the dream to recreate an empire following the historical narrative. This dream is founded on President Putin's sick obsession to rewrite history and recreate the nation's prestige after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This 'tragedy', or rather a historical fact, has become the motto of his presidency and leadership of the nation. The notion is supported by his hawkish close circle and, in reality, also by the majority of the population poisoned by propaganda imposed over the last decades. The war in Ukraine has again revealed the aggressive nature of Russia for which war is part of political discourse, thus endangering former Soviet republics and nations politically and militarily subordinated to the Soviet Union, among them Poland. The fate of Ukraine is very important for Polish people not only due to shared borders but also for historical relations, although there have still been some unfinished debates and disputes. The brutality toward Ukraine presents clearly what could be Poland's destiny if attacked by Russia, e.g., how Polish people would be treated when seen by Moscow and the Russian population as enemies and historical adversaries. The symbol of hate toward Poland was the establishment of the National Unity Day by the Kremlin, celebrated for the first time on 4 November 2005. It was linked with the expulsion of Polish troops from Moscow in November 1612. The drive to erase Poland from maps was visible among the major aims of the 1920 Polish-Soviet War in which decisive defeat was never forgotten by Stalin. The brutal aggression and the desire to destroy Ukraine as a nation triggered multidimensional support from the Polish population and government, driven by terrible historical memories and the reality of Russian behaviour towards a sovereign nation which was claimed by the Kremlin to be a 'brother'.

For many years, Polish authorities and the Baltic nations have warned partners from the European Union and NATO that Russia poses a real threat and may begin a military conflict to pursue its national interests. At the same time, Poland criticized the governments of some European countries for too reckless policy towards the Russian Federation and dependence on Russian resources (e.g., the Nord Stream 2). So, Russia's attack on Ukraine did not come as a complete surprise in Poland. Polish-Russian relations

have traditionally been difficult, linked to their geopolitical proximity and historical experiences. These are still playing decisive roles today; therefore, overcoming Polish-Russian antagonism in bilateral relations is not possible in the short term. Already after regaining full independence, achieving mutual understanding and reconciliation between Warsaw and Moscow has always been problematic. Prejudices and stereotypes rooted in history and cultural conditions have put a visible mark on the perception of Russia and Russians inside Poland, as well as Poland and Poles inside Russia.² The current Russian aggression against an independent and sovereign Ukraine will harm bilateral relations for years to come, and no trust could be regained soon. Historical memories combine with present political and economic disputes to further diminish any prospect of improvement in bilateral relations.

This paper is focused on the variety of support provided to Ukraine by Poland, recognizing distinctly that the collapse of Ukraine will present a direct and evident threat to national sovereignty and territorial integrity. The study is based on available official documents and data examined with primary and secondary research, allowing analysis and synthesis of specific aspects of bilateral relations and Poland's approach towards active support for Ukraine as an attacked nation. The structure of the text will relate to the NATO construct of instruments of power: Diplomatic, Information, Military and Economic (DIME), also covering the social dimension.³ The first part will focus on societal aspects and political decisions, followed by threat perception and the military support Poland is delivering to Ukraine, recognizing the long-term consequences if Russia achieves its desired end states. The conclusions will summarise major findings reflecting the complexity of the security situation, Poland's role, and the challenges the nation is facing.

2. Social and political awareness of the war in Ukraine

The Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding published three reports on public opinion under the title "Poland-Russia. Social Diagnosis"

² *Czynnik historyczny w stosunkach Polski z Rosją: wymiar społeczny i kulturalno-naukowy* 2017. – Warsaw: Polskie Towarzystwo Studiów Międzynarodowych, pp. 2–3. <https://ptsm.edu.pl/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/czynnik-historyczny-w-stosunkach-polski-z-rosja-wymiar-spoeczny-i-kulturalno-naukowy.-raport.pdf> (03.11.2022).

³ Instruments of Power could also use the Political, Military, Economic and Civil (PMEC) construct. **Comprehensive Operations Planning Directive Interim V 3.0**. Allied Command Operations, Mons 15 January 2021, p. 2–12.

in 2012, 2014, and 2020. Those reports included the results of research on the opinions of Poles about Russia and Russians, as well as Polish-Russian relations. The vast majority of Poles assess Russia's attitude towards Poland as definitely or somewhat unfriendly (80% in 2012, 82% in 2014, and 79% in 2020).⁴ The annexation of Crimea caused trust toward Russia to fall to 46%, which then increased in six years to 64% positive responses based on the belief that the Russians' attitude towards Poles could be friendly. However, this was related to Russia as a nation and the Russian people, but not to its political and military leadership. Although the two nations were seen as ethnically distant, associations with the word 'Russian' were generally positive or neutral, highlighting Slavic identity, hospitality, and other similarities and cultural closeness. Negative associations were linked with alcohol, the 'poor' Russian nation, and 'bad' government. The latter was based on perceiving Russia as an authoritarian country (74%), undemocratic (11%) and unfriendly (45%) towards neighbours (2020).⁵ Some 60% of respondents were critical of the Kremlin's actions, imperialism, and expansionism poisoned by propaganda, lies, and manipulation by state authorities. Few respondents held a positive or neutral opinion on Russian foreign policy, based on the Russian authorities' efforts to promote aggressively the national narrative and interests. The aggression in Ukraine has significantly changed the perception of Russia, and not only its leadership, as expressed by Poland's political leaders. In April 2022, as many as 79% of Poles recognized that "*the war in Ukraine threatens the security of our country*", according to the Public Opinion Research Center's survey; in 2020 there were only 42% of negative opinions.⁶ Next, 80% supported a ban on Russian gas and oil imports.⁷ The threat assessment by political elites and the population caused a stronger cohesion of society, which also has historical connotations related to aggressive and expansionist Russia. This threat perception proved to be realized by the of whole society and, again, history was a reminder of the Russian approach toward Poland. The outcome of this was societal support for Ukraine to underpin those who left the country and to directly support an effort to fight for freedom and territorial integrity.

⁴ **Polska–Rosja diagnoza społeczna 2020.** 2020. – Warsaw: Polish–Russian Centre for Dialogue and Understanding, p. 9.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16.

⁶ **Stosunek do innych narodów 2020.** – Warsaw: Research Communiqué No 31/2020, Public Opinion Research Centre, March 2020, pp. 3–4.

⁷ **Polish Public Opinion 2022.** – Warsaw: Public Opinion Research Centre, April 2022, pp. 1–2.

What has been critical is that Poland welcomed the largest number of refugees from Ukraine. From February to May, an estimated 3.296 million people came to Poland through border crossings from Ukraine⁸, mainly women and children. It should be emphasized that in Poland there was no need to establish refugee camps (which is a constant practice during migration crises) because of the generosity of Polish society. Therefore, most people found shelter in Polish families' homes or those provided by Ukrainian friends and families already living in Poland. Before the war in Ukraine, some 1.4 million Ukrainians were living and working in Poland, recognizing opportunities there. This number significantly increased when war broke out. The commitment of local governments, volunteers, and the Polish government was also visible. In April 2022, the Sejm passed regulations accelerating the registration of Ukrainian citizens in the PESEL system (or Personal Identification Code). Next, supplies of medicines were enabled to be delivered by the Governmental Strategic Reserves Agency, including the creation of a Help Line to speed up the process of donations of medicines, hygiene products, food, clothes, and other necessary commodities. Moreover, special bank accounts were opened allowing financial support in three currencies: PLN, EUR, and USD.⁹ During the same period, the Bank Gospodarstwa Krajowego was allowed to grant guarantees for the repayment of loans or other liabilities incurred by businesspersons. The number of war refugees is still increasing as until November 2022 as many as 7.37 million people had crossed the Polish-Ukrainian border according to The Polish Border Guard, of whom 5.96 moved back to Ukraine.¹⁰ Again, these refugees have still mainly been women and children escaping the war nightmare. This number is thought to rise in the coming months as the coming winter will create an additional challenge for the population, closely linked with the constant Russian terrorist attacks against critical infrastructure, especially power plants and water supplies.

The historical connotations of the negative perception of Russia in Poland are also the result of the instrumental use of history using propaganda-based interpretations. Politicians, especially those radical ones, operationalized tragic episodes and historical processes to place the other nation under the

⁸ **Official announcement of the Border Guard on May 10.** 2022. Warsaw, May 2022. https://twitter.com/Straz_Graniczna (25.10.2022).

⁹ **Rządowa Agencja Rezerw Strategicznych** 2022. – Warsaw as of 24 November 2022. <https://www.rars.gov.pl/> (26.10.2022).

¹⁰ **Ilu uchodźców z Ukrainy jest w Polsce** 2022.– 300GOSPODARKA 16 November 2022. <https://300gospodarka.pl/news/uchodzcy-z-ukrainy-w-polsce-liczba> (16.11.2022).

pillory of international opinion.¹¹ History played an important role during the war in Ukraine as Russia distorted the truth by reinterpreting it, as was the case when denying that Stalin ordered the massacre of Polish officers in 1940. However, in 2010 the Lower House of the Russian parliament approved the declaration that “*Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin personally ordered the Katyn massacre of Polish officers in 1940*”¹² and then-Polish premier Tusk and premier Putin honoured Katyn’s victims during a ceremony. The events of the last two decades, which have demonstrated Russian expansionism, have reinforced the pre-existing historical and cultural fixations held by the Polish political elites throughout the period after 1989. The most notable events were Russian aggression against Georgia in 2008, the presidential plane crash in Smolensk in 2010, and Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2014. The use of military power by Russia in the post-Soviet area has traditionally sparked a harsh response from Polish political elites. From the beginning of the Russian invasion, the Polish government called for the introduction of hard sanctions against the Russian Federation, including a ban on natural resources which have been fuelling the Russian war machine. Such resources still allow it to rebuild some elements of the armed forces, representing a long-term threat. Such a decisive stand has been constantly presented in international fora, specifically during NATO, European Union, and United Nations sessions. Just after twenty days after the outbreak of the war, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, together with the Prime Ministers of the Czech Republic and Slovenia, was the first among European leaders to visit Kyiv to express support and solidarity with Ukraine.¹³ It is worth underlining that the Polish Ambassador Bartosz Cichocki stayed in the capitol during the initial Russian attack and massive bombardment of the city. Politically, Poland has been very direct in condemning the Russian aggression and this was explicitly expressed on international forums, asking NATO, EU, UN and other entities

¹¹ **Zięba R.** 2018, Główne problemy w stosunkach polsko-rosyjskich / Main Problems in Polish-Russian Relations. *Stosunki Międzynarodowe – International Relations* No 3 (Vol. 54), pp. 15–18.

¹² **Russian parliament admits Stalin ordered Katyn massacre** 2010. RFI, 26 November 2010. <https://www.rfi.fr/en/europe/20101126-russia-admits-stalin-ordered-katyn-massacre> (03.11.2022).

¹³ **Prime Ministers of Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovenia met in Kyiv with the Prime Minister and President of Ukraine** 2022. – Warsaw: Website of the Republic of Poland, 23 March 2022. <https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/prime-ministers-of-poland-the-czech-republic-and-slovenia-met-in-kyiv-with-the-prime-minister-and-president-of-ukraine> (03.11.2022).

to act decisively. This request was based on recognizing Russia as an existential threat to Poland. President Duda, during his visit to Kyiv in May 2022, emphasized the importance of international support for Ukraine and highlighted that only Ukraine is in a position to decide its future. He was the first head of state who provided the address to Ukraine's parliament (Verkhovna Rada) since the start of Russia's war; he stated, "*the free world today has the face of Ukraine!*".¹⁴ This was not the first visit as in April the presidents of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—Andrzej Duda, Alar Karis, Egils Levits and Gitanas Nausėda—visited Kyiv and met President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Ukrainian President recognized the importance of such an engagement as being "*particularly important as a show of European support in our struggle for freedom*" and of symbolic, material, and political value¹⁵. In this context, it is worth recalling the visit of President Lech Kaczyński to Georgia in 2008 as a symbol of solidarity with an attacked nation. He condemned the Russian aggression against Georgia and warned against further aggressive steps from Russia towards its neighbours, saying "*Today Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic states, and then, perhaps, the time will come for my country, Poland*".¹⁶ Such words were a prophetic vision, so Ukraine is "now" and the question is which nation could be the next target. One good example of cooperation and solidarity has been the Lublin Triangle, founded on 28 July 2020. This tripartite format aimed to reintroduce the historic ties between Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine, referring to the 1569 Union of Lublin. The forum has been very actively supporting Ukraine during the war, as expressed in the "Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland and Ukraine on the second anniversary of the Lublin Triangle" in July 2022. It condemned Russian aggression and emphasized "*the unanimity of the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland and Ukraine regarding the need to hold Russia accountable for the crime of aggression, for war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of genocide committed on*

¹⁴ **Speech by the President of Poland, Andrzej Duda at the Verkhovna Rada, May 22, 2022 (VIDEO)**. 2022. – Kyiv: Kyiv Post, 23 May 2022.

¹⁵ **Tilles, D.** 2022. Presidents of Poland and Baltic states visit Kyiv to show support for Ukraine. – Fundacja Notes from Poland, 13 April 2022. <https://notesfrompoland.com/2022/04/13/presidents-of-poland-and-baltic-states-visit-kyiv-to-show-support-for-ukraine/> (05.11.2022).

¹⁶ **Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Ukraine appeal to Russia over Georgia** 2008. – The Baltic Times, 08 August. 2008. https://www.baltictimes.com/poland_lithuania_latvia_ukraine_appeal_to_russia_over_georgia/ (15.11.2022).

the territory of Ukraine".¹⁷ These three nations proved their unity based on their threat assessment.

The Russian threat is not new, as was recognized and highlighted in the past decade as defined in Poland's Defence Ministry 'Concept of Defence of Republic of Poland' in 2017, leading to the conclusion that "*the scale of threats resulting from the Russian aggressive policy had not been adequately assessed in the past*".¹⁸ It acknowledged Russia, taking into consideration the annexation of Crimea in 2014, as a future major threat, followed by a destabilized Middle East and North Africa, leading to a migration crisis and activities from terrorist organizations. It assumed that security is evolving regionally and globally, directly influencing the EU as an international actor and Poland as a regional one. One chapter 'Aggressive Policy of the Russian Federation' was dedicated to Moscow as "*it poses a threat mainly for Poland and other countries in the region, but also for all other nations desirous of a stable international order*"¹⁹ in the long-term until 2032, underpinned by the Kremlin's foreign policy, the modernization of armed forces and the utilization of other orchestrated instruments of power. It was discussed in terms of the modernization of armed forces, 'snap exercises', and political rhetoric, which were increasing tensions and uncertainty about security and stability.²⁰ It was assumed that this nation directly influences the near neighbourhood, particularly Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova and Central Asia nations. Such estimates have been valid, as proven by the military aggression against the independent Ukraine.

3. Military concerns and active support

Poland has been cooperating very closely with Ukraine, contributing to the reform and evolution of Ukrainian armed forces to reach the West's military standards. The joint Lithuanian–Polish–Ukrainian Brigade

¹⁷ **Joint Statement of the Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Lithuania, the Republic of Poland and Ukraine on the second anniversary of the Lublin Triangle** 2022. – Website of the Republic of Poland, 28 July 2022. <https://www.gov.pl/web/diplomacy/joint-statement-of-the-foreign-ministers-of-the-republic-of-lithuania-the-republic-of-poland-and-ukraine-on-the-second-anniversary-of-the-lublin-triangle> (15.11.2022).

¹⁸ **The Concept of Defence of the Republic of Poland** 2017. – Warsaw: Ministry of Defence, 05 May 2017, p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21–24.

²⁰ **Jacob, A.** 2017. Defense Opportunities in Poland, MultiLingual, MultiLingual Computing, Inc., January/February 2017. <https://multilingual.com/pdf-issues/2017-01-02.pdf> (15.11.2022).

(LITPOLUKRBRIG), created in 2014, has been supporting such training missions through exercises and military exchanges.²¹ Moreover, the Polish Task Force made up of soldiers of selected Polish brigades entered the Joint Multinational Training Group—Ukraine (JMTG-U). Similarly, Polish special operations troops from, e.g., the Commando Military Unit and the Special Forces Component Command trained Ukrainian partners. General Rajmund Andrzejczak, Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces, recognized the Armed Forces of Ukraine as the “*most important partner outside NATO*” and stated that “*bilateral military cooperation is a priority*”.²² Polish experience and commitment were recognized in October 2022 by the European Union when Major General Piotr Trytek was selected as commander of the Military Assistance Mission in support of Ukraine (EUMAM Ukraine) to “*boost the country’s military capability*”.²³ The recent National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland reinforced the political elite’s preoccupation with aggressive Russian behaviour.²⁴ The strategy placed the neo-imperial policy of the Russian Federation, along with its willingness to use military force, as the most serious threat to Poland’s security. Assessing the threat from the Russian Federation, the nation sees it through the prism of its offensive military potential and hybrid activities below the threshold of war. Perception of the actions of the Russian Federation as a real military threat to Poland’s security contributed to the consensus of the Polish political elite on the need to strengthen Poland’s defence potential in the national dimension, within NATO, and in bilateral cooperation with the United States. Therefore, Poland is currently organising territorial defence forces (the aim is to have 50,000 strong forces) and acquiring anti-access/area denial operational capabilities to increase the possibilities of independent defence with these facts in mind. In parallel, it is involved in shaping the adaptation of the North Atlantic Alliance and activities aimed at strengthening the security of NATO’s Eastern Flank.

²¹ **The Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade** 2022. – Website as of 16 November 2022. <https://litpolukrbrig.wp.mil.pl/en/> (16.11.2022).

²² **Kowalska-Sendek M.; Zalesiński, Ł.** 2021. In the Only Right Direction. – Warsaw: Polska Zbrojna 15, September 2021. <http://www.polska-zbrojna.pl/home/articleshow/35292?t=In-the-Only-Right-Direction> (16.11.2022).

²³ **Polish general chosen to lead EU training mission for Ukrainian troops** 2022. – Reuters, 28 October 2022. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/polish-general-chosen-lead-eu-training-mission-ukrainian-troops-2022-10-28/> (16.11.2022).

²⁴ **The National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland** 2020. – Warsaw: The President of Poland Website, 12 May 2020, p. 6. https://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dokumenty/National_Security_Strategy_of_the_Republic_of_Poland_2020.pdf (16.11.2022).

At the same time, the presence of US combat units in Poland, and Central and Eastern Europe is a key deterrence factor against the Russian threat. The development of stronger national resilience and developing a holistic governmental approach to defence will underpin the joint national effort to face “*threats, including hybrid ones, ensure the universal nature of civil defence and protection of the population as well as build-up and maintain the capacity to recover the necessary resources*”²⁵

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Polish Parliament passed a new law on the defence of the homeland which unified a large part of military law. The law allowed for the establishment of the Armed Forces Support Fund—a new financial mechanism that is to accelerate the modernization process of the Polish Armed Forces. Defense Minister Mariusz Błaszczak also announced that from 2023 at least 3% of GDP will be allocated to defence and 250,000 active-duty personnel will be reached in the future²⁶. This is based on the assessment that Russia is and will be an existential threat if not stopped by a decisive and united effort, especially from NATO and the EU. Therefore, the country is ready to pay the price of such commitments, which was already economically evident when Russia cut gas supplies as an economic instrument of power to punish with non-military ways of waging war.

The location of Poland in Europe between the East and West has been an important factor influencing internal policy and international relations throughout the centuries. Now it is playing a specific role as a critical transition point for delivering military support to Ukraine, allowing it to continue combat operations. That factor will continue, boosting Poland’s status within international organizations while at the same time necessitating the development of its reliable military and non-military potential. This status is always related to the need to possess significant capabilities for self-defence supported by political and economic solidarity with other European and non-European nations. Poland has been among those nations delivering reasonable military support to Ukraine from the beginning of the War. This was shown by the fact that the country has been among the top three nations delivering support to Ukraine in terms of percentage of GDP. According to the World Economy Institute, Latvia allocates 0.92% of its GDP to bilateral cooperation with Ukraine, Estonia 0.85%, and Poland 0.49%. Lithuania assigns 0.43%, and

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 15–17.

²⁶ **Ustawa o obronie Ojczyzny – fundament nowej siły Wojska Polskiego 2022.** – Warsaw: Website of the Ministry of Defence. <https://www.gov.pl/web/obrona-narodowa/ustawa-o-obronie-ojczyzny---fundament-nowej-sily-wojska-polskiego> (25.10.2022).

Norway 0.38% of GDP.²⁷ In terms of pure numbers, the largest contributor has been the USA—0.25% and some 53 billion Euros—with mainly military aid being a game-changer in the course of the war, allowing Ukraine to defend itself effectively.

Polish support for Ukraine was immediate from the very beginning, showing solidarity with an attacked nation and recognizing the threat to Poland and the whole of Europe. Poland has been one of the main countries to supply weapons to Ukraine, including T-72M/M1 tanks²⁸, BWP-1 infantry fighting vehicles, BM-21 ‘Grad’ 122 mm multiple rocket launchers, 2S1 ‘Gvozdika’ self-propelled howitzers and short-range air defence systems²⁹. The Polish authorities also wanted to deliver MIG-29 aircraft, but this project did not materialize due to disputes within NATO. Moreover, the topic proved to be too public, causing unnecessary discussion; usually, such critically important donations are made without publicizing them. Poland has also become a major hub for the transport of weapons to Ukraine due to the long border with Ukraine and good logistics. The civilian airport located in the town of Rzeszow has become one of the major hubs for military transports guarded by Patriot missile batteries against potential threats.

Polish weapon systems are very appreciated by the Ukrainian defence forces, being tested in real combat when fighting Russian aggression. Produced by Mesko, the Polish defence technology company Piorun’s man-portable air-defence system (MANPAD) was very effective in shooting down rotary-wing platforms (e.g., Mi-24 and Ka-52), unmanned aircraft (e.g., ‘Orlan-10’) and combat aircraft such as Su-34 and Su-25.³⁰ The newest versions of the ‘Grot’ rifle produced by the Radom-based Łucznik factory received positive feedback, highlighting such characteristics as ergonomics, comfort of use and reliability when operating on challenging terrains and

²⁷ **Wsparcie dla Ukrainy w stosunku do PKB. Polska w ścisłej czołówce 2022.** – Money.pl, 12 October 2022. <https://www.money.pl/gospodarka/wsparcie-dla-ukrainy-w-stosunku-do-pkb-polska-w-scislej-czolowce-6822171297897280a.html> (03.11.2022).

²⁸ **Palowski, J.** 2022. Upgraded ex-Polish T-72s Spotted in Ukraine. – Defence24, 04 May 2022. <https://defence24.com/armed-forces/land-forces/upgraded-ex-polish-t-72s-spotted-in-ukraine> (03.11.2022).

²⁹ **Pacholski, Ł.** 2022. Ponad 200 czołgów T-72 trafiło z Polski na Ukrainę. – Rzeczpospolita 30, April 2022. <https://radar.rp.pl/rosja/art36213761-ponad-200-czolgow-t-72-trafilo-z-polski-na-ukraine> (03.11.2022).

³⁰ **Reszczyński J.** 2022. Ukrainian Media Praise the Polish Piorun MANPADS. – Defence24, 05 August 2022. <https://defence24.com/armed-forces/ukrainian-media-praise-the-polish-piorun-manpads> (16.11.2022).

in difficult weather. As part of military assistance, Poland has donated 18 pieces of the NATO-compatible AHS 155-mm self-propelled tracked howitzer 'Krab' produced by the Huta Stalowa Wola. It was a useful donation as the howitzer proved its value in Ukrainian soldiers' hands. 'Krab' was very reliable in difficult terrain and weather conditions due to its speed, high degree of automation, well-thought-out design, and reliable fire control system. In June 2022, Ukraine decided to purchase 54 AHS 'Krab' self-propelled howitzers, being the first large export order for Polska Grupa Zbrojeniowa holding in the last decade³¹. Poland proposed another option for NATO countries to buy AHS Krab self-propelled howitzers from it and donate them to Ukraine.

Geographical location raised the question of reliance on communication systems to move forces and equipment using land lines of communication considering the growing threat from the East. Among the topics under discussion, road and rail movement has been cited as critical to deploy and sustain NATO troops when relocated closer to the Eastern Flank and remains a challenge. The situation is especially complicated when considering the Baltic nations as the Polish rail system uses the European rail gauge, while the Baltics still use the Russian gauge (which is different due to a Soviet decision to prevent invaders from using Russian railroads). Time-consuming cargo transfer in Lithuanian railway stations is therefore required. In the future, projects such as 'Rail Baltica' and 'Via Baltica' will improve the situation as the Baltic States' gauges will be replaced to meet European standards. Nevertheless, cooperation between NATO ('NATO Schengen Zone') and the European Union (PESCO 'Military Mobility') is important to speed up project execution to adapt railroads and highways for the transport of oversized cargo such as tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, air defence systems or self-propelled howitzers. Military experts have already been involved in planning both 'Rail Baltica' and 'Via Baltica' to make this happen. Further connection of those two projects with the 'Via Carpathia' and inclusion in the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) will extend the network along and towards the NATO Eastern Flank, including NATO nations located in South Europe.³²

³¹ **Poland proposes Western Europe countries to buy AHS Krab self-propelled howitzers for Ukraine** 2022. – Kyiv: Ukrainian Military Portal, 09 September 2022. <https://mil.in.ua/en/news/poland-proposes-western-europe-countries-to-buy-ahs-krab-self-propelled-howitzers-for-ukraine/> (03.11.2022).

³² **Papatolios, N.** 2021. Lithuania roots for Via Carpathia to become part of TEN-T network. – RailFreight 03, March 2021. <https://www.railfreight.com/railfreight/2021/03/03/lithuania-roots-for-via-carpathia-to-become-part-of-ten-t-network/?gdp=accept> (25.10.2022).

Large-scale exercises such as ‘Defender-Europe’, including deployment of the “*division-size combat-credible force from the United States to Europe, the drawing of equipment and the movement of personnel and equipment across the theatre to various training areas*”, are proving the importance of infrastructure. During the exercise ‘Defender 2020’ as many as fourteen US air and seaports of embarkation in four states and seaports of debarkation in six European countries were employed. This should be supported by pre-positioning military equipment closer to the East Flank, but again this requires significant investment in purposely located storage for pre-positioned equipment.³³

4. Conclusions

In the event of a successful Russian aggression and the seizure of Ukraine at short notice, Russian troops would already be on the Polish and NATO/EU border. What is important is that those troops would be ready to start aggression against Poland, also historically recognized as an enemy, and the armed forces would be convinced that those are still the capable units we have seen on the Red Square. Ukraine also flanks Belarus, the Russian ally, again enhancing the security of Poland from a military point of view. Geography is indicating Poland as an important nation for the transit of goods using highways and the railway system, linking West Europe and the European Union nations with Ukraine, the three Baltic nations, Belarus, and further afield to Russia and the Far East. Such a location could impact the economy of those nations if stopped or disturbed. Therefore, Poland is promoting the reinforcement of the NATO Eastern Flank with improved command and control, upgraded defence plans, verification of NATO’s rapid reinforcement strategy, an increased military presence, and the pre-positioning of military equipment. Moreover, it is emphasizing the importance of finalizing the accession of Sweden and Finland into the Alliance to strengthen NATO,

³³ **DEFENDER-Europe 20 Fact Sheet** 2019. U.S. Army Europe, 06 December 2019. <https://www.eur.army.mil/Portals/19/documents/DEFENDEREurope/DEFENDEREurope-20Factsheet191216.pdf>; **DEFENDER – Europe 20**. 2019. U.S. Army Europe 06 December 2019. <https://www.eur.army.mil/DefenderEurope> (15.11.2022); **Fiorenza, N.** 2019. Defender-Europe 20’ will see largest US deployment to Europe in 25 years. – Jane’s Defence Weekly, 16 October 2019, p. 12; **Veebel, V.; Śliwa, Z.; Ploom, I.** 2020. The NATO ‘Defender 2020’ Exercise in the Baltic States: Will Measured Escalation Lead to Credible Deterrence or Provoke an Escalation? – Comparative Strategy, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 368–384.

Poland and the Eastern Flank nations “limiting Russia’s aggressive possibilities”.³⁴

The perception of Russia and Russians in Poland has its roots in deep historical and cultural preconceptions, reinforced by the current political, military, economic and social events. The historical policy of both countries, used instrumentally in current politics, is having a serious impact on mutual relations. Polish political elites and society are witnessing Russian historical revisionism and are alarmed by the aggressive actions of the Russian Federation towards its neighbours, especially the threat and use of military force. Currently, the political leadership considers Russia as the most serious threat to Poland’s security; this perception shapes national strategies and actions taken in the sphere of security and defence, as well as public opinion in Poland. In recent years, limiting contacts and freezing relations have rather become the norm instead of a proactive policy between nations. Public opinion shares most of the elite’s fears and assessments concerning the authorities and the foreign policy of the Russian Federation. The real threat is that Russia will try to impact the outcome of future elections in Poland, as it did in the US election. Anti-Polish propaganda, use of fake news, disinformation, special services, and agents of influence will be massively deployed to destabilize Poland internally and isolate it in the international forum. Such hybrid approaches are already present, not least using migrants from Belarus territory, and soon the next wave from Kaliningrad could be in play to follow the Kremlin agenda.

Poland cannot tolerate the aggression toward Ukraine, based on the recognition that Russia is an existential threat to the nation in the long term. The reality is that, after rebuilding capabilities, especially military ones, it will reassess the security environment and strike again. The direction of the aggression is not easy to predict, both in time and space, but Poland cannot be excluded as a potential direction of violent behaviour. It was assumed that if Ukraine were subordinated to Russia, Poland would become the front line facing this unpredictable and violent enemy. The reason is, again, based on history and ongoing support for Ukraine, as multidimensional assistance is one of the reasons Russia is being humiliated as a nation with very big ambitions, a wrong assessment of the situation, and much overestimated military capabilities. With such a lesson identified, future plans will be revised by the

³⁴ **Strengthening NATO’s Eastern Flank is the only method of deterrence** 2022. – Warsaw: Website of the Republic of Poland, 13 May 2022. <https://www.gov.pl/web/national-defence/strengthening-natos-eastern-flank-is-the-only-method-of-deterrence> > (28.11.2022).

Russian leadership to implement lessons learned and be ready to challenge Western nations and values again. In the meantime, it will use non-military capabilities to challenge Poland, trying to divide it internally using a variety of tools; the so-called hybrid approach, already applied towards Ukraine and the West, will be in full play. A change of leadership will not transform the Russian drive towards building an empire ready to dictate its own rules to other nations and to recreate regional and global influences. This is causing Poland to develop a resilient mindset among politicians and with strong support from society. A pan-societal consensus must be achieved as the lack of one caused losing sovereignty in the past. It is especially important to ensure that political consent among political parties guarantees the continuity of the creation of strong defence and deterrence capabilities within a total defence concept supported by a resilient society. Poland has received a very strong warning by presenting Moscow's plans and 'dreams', and Warsaw was very often mentioned in this sense, always in connection with a hostile narrative. A critical factor is a regional cooperation with other democratic nations endangered by the Eastern neighbour. This is especially true for the three Baltic nations, and such cooperation is extending towards the Black Sea nations, creating a much broader NATO Eastern Front. In the future, after Sweden and Finland join NATO, the frontline will reach the High North. Poland will always stay within the Eastern Flank/Front, and this is the fate of the nation which caused many challenges and wars throughout history.

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