

'FOR OUR FREEDOM AND YOURS'

POLAND'S READING OF THE UKRAINIANS' STRUGGLE AGAINST RUSSIA



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FOR our freedom and yours is a political slogan with strong historical connotations. It first appeared in the 19th century – at a time when Poland was non-existent on a political map of Europe as a result of [partitions](#) by Russia, Austria and Prussia in the second half of the 18th century – to soon become a signal of the universal dimension of the Polish resistance towards Russian occupiers. It was aimed to tell the world that since the Poles were fighting against despotic tsarist regime, their struggle served not only the re-gaining of the Polish state's independence, but also the freedom of all people. The slogan has been used repeatedly by various Polish military units fighting in Europe throughout the 19th and 20th century – among them by a famous freedom-fighter [Josef Bem](#) (in Hungary known as Bem József and in Turkey as Murad Pasha) – but to the Poles it has never lost its universal

message: that a fight against despots and their imperialism, a fight for each country's freedom to make its own choices serves the well-being of all. Thus “for our freedom and yours” became an [operational code for modern Polish decision-makers](#).

No wonder that it also quickly became the main lenses through which Poland's foreign policy and security apparatus – and the Polish society – look at the war that Ukraine fights against Russian invaders. Vladimir Putin's Russia, a direction that the country took after his infamous [speech in Munich in 2007](#), is an emanation of everything that Poland worries about, because it can fully understand the consequences due to its turbulent history. Russia's imperialism – both in its drive to re-draw European borders by force, and in its modern meaning as a way to enforce the internal logic of Russia's state system and its international outlook upon others – simply rings a bell of

the old times, when rules were set by the most powerful ones with a total disregard of opinions voiced by less powerful members of the international system. It also reminds of the old-time logic in which being right meant having more military power, and not acting within the frames of the international law, jointly agreed by the international community. All in all, in Poland's eyes Russia's aggression towards Ukraine is not purely an illegal land grab. It is a challenge to the current international order and a way to re-introduce imperialism, with its affection for the spheres of influences where a superpower can decide for everybody else as the system's main logic. Therefore, in Poland the fight of the Ukrainian people is seen not only as their struggle for their own territory and independence, but also as a fight for the future of Europe and international order. Precisely speaking, a fight for our freedom to choose the alliances we want to join, the way we want to organise economic, societal

and political spheres in our countries.

Poland has been warning that such a challenge from Russia would finally come for quite a long time. In 2008, during his trip to Tbilisi which took place during Russia's aggression towards Georgia, Polish late president Lech Kaczyński [famously said](#): "We know that today it is Georgia, tomorrow it will be Ukraine, the day after tomorrow Baltic States, and then, perhaps, the time will come also for my country, Poland". Unfortunately, his forecast remained unanswered by the allies who soon had another idea of a "reset" with Russia, [ignoring numerous warnings made](#) by either Poland or the representatives of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. While there's no analytical use in claiming or celebrating the superiority of Polish political thought over Western one when it comes to Russia and a threat that its revisionism poses to the international system, it is worth quickly re-examining the sources of this good forecasting. This may be helpful not only in bridging the differences between the Western allies and their approach to Russia, but also in designing a proper strategy that would allow the Western community to counter a systemic threat coming from the East.

STRATEGIC CULTURE, STRATEGIC DECISIONS AND "STRATEGIC ANGER"

A fear of Russia's imperialism and its consequences forms a very important part of Poland's strategic culture. It was shaped not only by the above-mentioned events of the 18th century when Russia's policy led to Poland's partition, but also by a more recent history. In 1945, after the Second World War ended, Poland fell into the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union and became a part of the Eastern Block as the Polish People's Republic (Polska Rzeczpospolita Ludowa, PRL).



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Though technically the country was independent – it existed on the political map as a separate entity, not as a part of the Soviet Union – it lost its sovereignty. Till 1989, the lion's share of the most important decisions in the foreign policy had to be consulted with and greenlighted by the 'Soviet Comrades' in Moscow. Not only did this gravely diminish a room of manoeuvre for PRL's decision-makers in foreign policy, but it also deprived the state from the possibility to participate in the initiatives which could have contributed to its development, such as the [Marshall Plan](#).

There were three main lessons that modern Polish decision makers – those that were to be in power after 1989 – drew from these experiences. First, that Russia's imperialism with its attachment to the spheres of influence concept equals a forced synchronization between Moscow and its subordinates, and thus, very often, distress to the client state's citizens (though Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to stop the country's liberalisation became arguably the best known example of using military force to enforce Moscow's will upon its clients,

the Poles have their own traumas, one of them being the [Martial Law](#) introduced in 1981 [under Soviet pressure](#)). Second, that if the decisions concerning Poland would be discussed without the country's representation – after all Poland's fate following the Second World War was a result of the agreements made by the Big Three – it would most likely bring unfavourable and unwanted results for the country. Third, and as a consequence, that the Polish independence and sovereignty will be best served by such an international system that prioritizes international law over power, and participation over spheres of influence.

These lessons were applied by Polish decision makers after 1989, constituting pillars of Poland's modern foreign policy. Thanks to them Polish foreign policy and security apparatus quickly understood that the country's well-being rests on becoming a member of the Western community – an "entity" that, in Polish decision makers' eyes, favoured international law over power and spheres of influences, and due to its democratic credentials and mechanisms

empowered states that did not enjoy a superpower status. This thinking was followed by strategic decisions. The first one was to embark on an endeavour to join NATO (1997) and the EU (2004) and later work on strengthening the country's position in both organisations. The second was to base the eastern vector of Polish foreign policy on an assumption that the existence of independent – and, possibly, also democratic – Belarus and Ukraine lays in Poland's best interests. It gave life to such initiatives as the Eastern Partnership with its main rationale that a lack of the EU's effective influence in the east would equal strengthening Russia's grip – and its internal logic – over these countries. The third one was to enhance the economic ties with Western countries to tie their interest with Poland even closer, a strategy especially visible, apart from the EU, in [Polish approach to the United States after 2016](#). The fourth one was to advocate for the international law, a constant theme in Polish activities on the international stage, as evidenced, for example, by Polish presidents [speeches](#) during sessions of the United Nations General Assembly or Poland's [priorities](#) as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 2018-2019.

Poland became quite a successful part of the Western community and, thanks to its NATO membership, felt relatively safe. One could also argue that Poland felt more confident as a part of the Western world, because it even initiated a kind of its own "reset" with Russia, a policy [described in 2011 by the former Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk](#) as a by-product of Poland's growing position in the EU and Russia's rising awareness that it was harder and harder to bypass Poland if it wanted to do business with the EU. Yet, it seems, that, on the contrary, the true source of the "reset" was Poland's insecurity inside the European



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Union and thus a decision to design Poland's Eastern policy to the Western countries' liking to strength Poland's voice in the EU. This hypothesis seems even more probable taking under consideration that nearly at the same time Polish President Bronisław Komorowski – who originated from the same party as Tusk – [said](#) during his visit to the United States that Poland had not been ready for a full reset with Russia, arguing that: “If you live just next door with somebody for 1,000 years, it is not possible to reset all the past relations using just one push of the reset button. We are not able to fully reset and delete 1,000 years of uneasy history with Russians”. It would be hard to find a better evidence that the influence of Poland's strategic culture on decision-makers had still been strong, even if its practical impact on the foreign policy had to temporarily give in to political considerations.

Nonetheless, this “pause” did not last long, as the political

circumstances in Europe changed dramatically with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Since then Polish decision-makers have been almost unequivocally warning that Russia has been a threat to both European and international order, arguing that Western allies had to quickly adapt to this reality. There were two main political fronts on which Polish statement concentrated to realise this vision. The first one was NATO, with the [2016 Warsaw Summit decisions](#) as a key pillar – and, in Poland's eyes, barely the first meaningful step – of the Alliance adaptation to a threat coming from Russia (accompanied by the Polish approach to the EU strategic autonomy debate with postulates of non-duplication with NATO and maintaining the US role in the continent's security). The second was a political battle to kill the Nord Stream 2 (NS2) – a gas pipeline from Russia to Germany, running through the Baltic Sea and thus weakening the position of

Ukraine as a transit country for Russian natural resources (and, through its design, to many Poles also a reminder of a pattern known from the old-times, namely a policy executed by the big powers over the heads of smaller ones). Contrary to Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel's numerous statements, Polish decision-makers have repeatedly argued that the NS2 was a political project that would be used by Russia as a geopolitical leverage over Europe. The fact that the German allies would not listen, introducing only [minor changes to their Ostpolitik](#), translated to “strategic anger” in Warsaw. This was one of the reasons why Donald Trump's policy towards Germany – particularly his criticism towards the NS2 and the Germany's unwillingness to live up to its NATO commitments when it comes to the percentage of the GDP spent on military – was so well-received by the ruling elites in Poland. It seems that in their eyes Trump's pressure on

Germany was simply a sine qua non for the country's turnaround in security, and not a threat to the NATO cohesion, as the most international observers saw it. As a result, one could argue that they considered Germans' position towards Russia and their ignorance of the perspective of the allies from the Eastern flank – very often described simply as a Russophobic, a term used also by [Russia in its disinformation campaigns](#) – as a bigger threat to the Alliance that Trump's statements and policy.

THE WAY FORWARD FOR THE WEST

When Russia re-invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Polish foreign and security apparatus had a much easier job than some of the Western partners in designing a proper policy towards Russia's aggression. It's not that the Polish political establishment has not been surprised at all by Putin's decision. Yet, Polish historical experience with Russia – Poland's strategic culture, the

“for our freedom and yours” operational code and practical political lessons that have been imprinted deep in the minds of any Polish decision-maker – helped politicians to quickly grasp the situation and realise that Russia’s loss in this war is the only possible solution, if the West wants to protect the remains of the current international order. This is why Poland granted unequivocal support to Ukraine – as evidenced not only by strong political gestures such as a decision by a [Polish ambassador to remain in Kiev](#) or a [visit to the capital city of Ukraine](#) when it was still under attack by Russia by Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, but also by sending [military equipment](#) – and engaged in the leadership exercise to mobilise Western support for it. Poland’s reading and approach towards Russia’s aggression – the fact that the country sees the fight of Ukraine as not only about the future of this state, but also as a fight for principles around which the international order should be organised – has another important consequence. It makes room for a dialogue with the current Russian regime extremely slim. After all, negotiations where the two sides have a different set of principles and a totally opposite worldview are usually tough. Under such circumstances, one should ask what should the

West approach towards Russia be? Should it be influenced by the lessons drawn from Poland – and the Baltic states – experiences? Or should they perspectives be, yet again, dismissed for the sake of the so-called Realpolitik? As the war in Ukraine shows, Poland, as well as the Baltic states, were right on Russia. This stemmed not from their prejudices, as it was often portrayed back in the time, but from their strategic cultures that were shaped by a fear of Russia’s imperialism. They simply know and understand Russia better, and thus ignoring their perspectives would result in creating important blind spots for the West’s strategy towards Russia. This should be a new definition of Realpolitik, which is even more evident when we take under consideration that Putin’s aim is to destroy the international order, which is a grave to the whole Western community. Secondly, when designing an approach towards Russia, it would be wise to listen carefully to what politicians and experts from Poland and other Eastern flank countries say. Even in such politically polarized countries as today’s Poland, there are areas where we can see a solid consensus. These are strong signals that postulates voiced in these spheres are not just politics, but vital interests,



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and thus ignoring them would result in weakening the joint Western approach by disengaging the Eastern partners. Third, it would be wise to supplement Western approach to Russia with investments in Poland, countries on the Eastern flank (via, for example, the [Three Seas Initiative](#)) and Ukraine. On the one hand, this may strengthen the “democratic bloc” close to the Russia borders – an extremely important factor in a longer term and at a times where a systemic rivalry between democratic and authoritarian systems is more and more visible. On the other hand, it may tame the populism and anti-EU sentiments which have feed on, at least to some extent, a growing feeling among some part of Eastern European societies that their interests are secondary to the one expressed by the West (take, for example, “strategic anger” of Poland caused by the NS2), or by a constant – and irritating for the Eastern flank countries – pattern to present them as “new member states”, though their membership in the EU has already turned 18. Fourth, if the West wants to strike a win against Putin’s Russia, it absolutely needs to stay united as disunity will bury any good strategy. After all, “for our freedom and yours” has not that a different meaning than “united we stand, divided we fall”.



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