Poland versus Russia: competition in Ukraine

Abstract

This study analyses relations in the triangle Poland – Russia – Ukraine since 2004, bringing an insightful perspective on the realist concept of competition in international relations. For the last sixteen years, despite their unequal power, Poland and Russia have competed in Ukraine. This competition involves not only a fight for influence (quite limited in the case of Poland), but also in respect of the political and economic model that is to be implemented in Ukraine and its international identity. Poland wants Ukraine to become “European”: stable, democratic and with a free market economy, to secure the eastern border of Poland, and to limit Ukraine’s dependence on Russia. This policy is executed both through bilateral cooperation and the Euro-Atlantic institutions, especially the European Union (EU). Russia, on the other hand, wants Ukraine to keep its post-Soviet identity. An authoritarian and corrupted Ukraine, remaining culturally a part of the “Russian world” is perceived as the guarantee of the Russian interests there, in particular in the context of the expansion of the North Atlantic Alliance and EU towards the East. For this reason Russia aims at impeding the development of the Polish-Ukrainian cooperation. Until 2014 Russia was largely successful in realizing its agenda thanks to the multiple channels of dependence existing between it and Ukraine. However, since the Revolution of Dignity and the beginning of the Russian war against Ukraine, the latter has engaged in a clearly discernible, though uncertain path to Europeanization, which may favor the implementation of the Polish scenario for Ukraine.

Theoretical framework

Competition in international relations can be broadly defined as “goal seeking behavior that strives to reduce the gains available to others.”\(^1\) or a situation in which “two actors in the international system have incompatible high-priority interests and one or both actors engage in
behavior that will be detrimental to the other’s interests.” The concept of competition for power or security is one of the key elements of realist theory of international relations. States also compete for assets, which form the material basis of their military power, such as population or wealth. In the light of classical realism, the existing situation can be explained by human nature, while the neorealists believe that the structure of the international system has led to the current state of affairs.

States compete in particular for domination over third countries. “Nation A may … pursue an imperialistic policy with regard to Nation C, which may either resist or acquiesce in that policy, while Nation B follows with regard to Nation C either a policy of imperialism or one of the status quo. … The pattern of the struggle for power between A and B is here not one of direct opposition, but of competition.” Both Nation A and Nation B can adopt either a policy of status quo, or a policy of imperialism. Competition appears more likely to lead to conflict if it involves revisionist powers. It can be avoided or managed if the competing states trust each other or share similar political values. If both A and B are revisionists, they may easily form an alliance and partition Nation C. However, if they are mutually hostile, Nation C will have an interest in prolonging their rivalry and acting as a balancer.

This overview of the concept of competition needs two comments. First, the realists are skeptical about the role of international institutions, such as the European Union, because the states reason in terms of individual gains, which are more difficult to be achieved through cooperation. However, in some cases, the realists agree that international institutions may be of interest, as they serve to balance external powers (such as the United States or Japan in case of the EU states). Second, it should be noted, that, contrary to the realist assumption, the states compete not only for power or its elements, but also for “honor and standing.” The latter issue has been studied in particular by the constructivist theory of international relations. The constructivists put an accent on the role of identity in international relations. They argue that
“the structures of human associations are determined primarily by shared ideas (…) the identities and the interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas”\textsuperscript{14}. If some states share the same ideas, they consider themselves as friends and their relations tend to be peaceful; if not, they will consider the others as enemies and their relations would be conflictual\textsuperscript{15}. The identity of a state can change in time and so may change its interests and policies\textsuperscript{16}. For these reasons the identity related issues strongly influence the security of the state\textsuperscript{17}. This concerns in particular the great powers, who need their identity in international relations to be recognized by the others – the hegemon cannot keep its role without its clients\textsuperscript{18}. The great powers (and in a lesser way other states) compete for “honor and standing”, because it is the necessary condition to maintain or to strengthen their international position.

Based on a research project developed by the RAND Corporation\textsuperscript{19}, this paper aims to analyze contemporary Polish-Russian competition in Ukraine since 2004 by trying to answer five questions:

1. What is the essential character of the competing nations?
2. What are their goals?
3. What strategies do they employ?
4. What specific features of the international system characterize the competition?
5. To what degree does the competition fit the theoretical framework?

**Poland, Russia and Ukraine**

Until 1989–1991 Poland, Ukraine and Russia were part of the communist bloc, the Polish People’s Republic being a satellite of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics (USSR) and Russia and Ukraine the “first” and the “second” republics, respectively, within the Union\textsuperscript{20}. Each country has undergone a transformation since the end of the communist system, but the experience and path of each have been significantly different. Poland became a part of the West,
Russia – a revision great power and Ukraine – a peripheral buffer state between the enlarged Euro-Atlantic institutions and the Russian Federation.

In 1989 the new democratic Polish authorities, which emerged from the opposition “Solidarity” trade union launched a broad program of economic reforms known as the “Balcerowicz plan”. Within a few years Poland became a fast-growing market economy, albeit at some social costs. The internal transformation was coupled with the reorientation of Polish foreign policy. Thanks to successful reforms, support of the Western states, and the relative weakness of Russia, Poland was able to join North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1999 and the EU in 2004. The membership in both organizations has been perceived as a key guarantee of security (especially against Russia) and prosperity.

Russia has remained largely under the control of the former Soviet nomenklatura which hampered the process of political and economic reforms. The first years of the Russian transition were characterized by poverty and growing economic inequalities. After the tumultuous Boris Yeltsin presidency (1991–1999), his successor Vladimir Putin strengthened the central power and progressively established an authoritarian regime, profiting from the high prices of the raw materials (in particular gas), which fueled the Russian economy. At the international level Russia was recognized as the legal successor of the Soviet Union. However, its ambitions of recovering the former position of a superpower, as well as its negative assessment and fears of the enlargement of the Western structures (NATO, later also the EU) in relation to Central and Eastern Europe led to an increasingly aggressive foreign policy. The wars in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (ongoing since 2014) provide ample proof.

Ukraine plays an important role for both Russia and the West, in particular Poland. Such situation is due to its size (603 thousand square km, including seven per cent – Crimea and certain parts of the Donets and Lugansk regions – not under the control of the Ukrainian authorities), demographic potential (41.9 million in 2020), strategic position between the...
enlarged EU/NATO, the Russian promoted Eurasian Economic Union and the Black Sea, as well as its economic assets: best in Europe black earth soils, gas transit system which transports some 35\% of the Russian gas imported by the EU\textsuperscript{30}, important military and industrial complex.

After gaining independence Ukraine followed a path of development similar to Russia’s\textsuperscript{31}. However, since the end of 1990s the two countries went different ways\textsuperscript{32}. The Ukrainian authorities had to face four challenges that blocked the establishment of an authoritarian regime: lack of energy resources which would fuel the state budget and limit the dependence on Russia\textsuperscript{33}, strong regional differences\textsuperscript{34}, powerful oligarchs\textsuperscript{35}, and the existence of a relatively active civil society. In 2004 the Orange Revolution forced the Ukrainian authorities to rerun falsified presidential elections, which eventually brought to power the pro-Western Victor Yushchenko (2005 – 2010)\textsuperscript{36}. In 2013 the pro-Russian president Victor Yanukovych (2010 – 2014) refused to sign the already negotiated association agreement with the EU. This decision was a direct cause of the Revolution of Dignity, which at the beginning of next year toppled down Yanukovych and led to the Russian intervention in Ukraine (illegal annexation of Crimea, proxy war in the Donbas region) \textsuperscript{37}. The new post-revolutionary authorities aimed at reforming the country. In fact the reforms undertaken have been inconsistent and some key problems (high corruption\textsuperscript{38}, oligarchisation of political and economic life\textsuperscript{39}) remained unsolved.

In the past Ukraine’s foreign policy was largely unstable and incoherent (“multi-vector”\textsuperscript{40}), which contributed to its position as a buffer state between EU/NATO and the Russian Federation. Nevertheless Ukraine was able to realize some basic aims in international relations: it has gained international recognition as an independent state, consolidated its statehood, institutionalized relations with its neighbors, main powers and regional organizations (Council of Europe, NATO, EU) and largely profited from both Russian and Western economic aid. It was unable to defend its territorial integrity against the Russian aggression in 2014. Since the
Revolution of Dignity Ukraine has adopted, at least on the declaratory level, a unanimously pro-Western policy, with the final aim being its accession to the EU and NATO\textsuperscript{41}. It has signed in particular the association agreement with the European Union, establishing a deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) between Ukraine and the EU\textsuperscript{42}. It implementation remains a challenge however, in particular because of lagging of internal reforms.
Table 1. Poland, Russia and Ukraine: main power indicators

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<th>Poland</th>
<th>Russia</th>
<th>Ukraine</th>
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<tr>
<td>Surface area (thousand square kilometres)</td>
<td>312.7</td>
<td>17,098.2</td>
<td>603.7(^a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population (2018, in million)</td>
<td>38,0</td>
<td>144,5</td>
<td>44,2</td>
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<td>Gross domestic product (2018, in billion dollars)</td>
<td>585</td>
<td>1657</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military expenditure (2018, in billion dollars)</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>61.4</td>
<td>4.7</td>
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\(^a\) Including seven per cent (Crimea and certain parts of the Donets and Lugansk regions) not under the control of the Ukrainian authorities.
Goals

**Poland’s goals towards Ukraine.** Since early 1990s Poland’s policy towards Ukraine has been relied on the program developed by the “Kultura” monthly, published by a group of Polish émigré intellectuals in France since 1947. “Kultura” team believed that “Poland can obtain and preserve an independent existence only within a federation encompassing all of Europe. (...) The right to take part in a future European federation will be enjoyed not only by the nations that formed sovereign states in 1939, but also by Ukrainians (...). Given the danger of Russian imperialism (...) the creation of an independent Ukraine (...) is, for Poland, a matter of capital significance.”

The Polish policy towards the Ukrainian neighbour has been based on six assumptions. Three of them are of a general, strategic nature. The other three concern more specific matters.

i. Poland has always perceived Ukraine as a key partner among its post-Soviet neighbors, due to its potential and geographical position in the region, ethno-cultural similarities to Poland and a relative independence vis-à-vis Russia. Neither Lithuania, much smaller than Poland, nor Belarus, too much dependent on the Russian Federation could play such a role.

ii. Poland is vitally interested in the Europeanization (or Westernization) of Ukraine – this concerns not only its potential accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures, but also its internal transformation. This approach takes into account the interests of both countries. Ukrainian adoption of the European (Western) values and identity is likely to lead to an improvement in the standards of democracy and the rule of law, and would also facilitate economic reforms and a rise in the standard of living. NATO accession would be the best of the available ways to guarantee its security. At the same time, an expansion of Euro-Atlantic structures eastward would relieve Poland of its status as a border state at the point of contact between the EU/NATO and the post-Soviet region. Increased internal stability in Ukraine
would also reduce the migration pressure from this country and the threat to Poland entailed by any political crisis in Ukraine or its becoming a failed state47.

iii. Poland seeks to bring Ukraine to the West primarily because it sees any eventual move of Ukraine into the Russian sphere of influence as a threat to both itself and Ukraine48. A Russia-dominated Eurasian space, including Ukraine, would share a common border with EU and NATO going from the Arctic Circle to the Black Sea, which would strengthen its influence in Central Europe and in the Balkans. On the political level this might led to a further deterioration of the democratic standards in the region. On the security level, Poland would need a better military protection, based on its own resources and NATO presence; its energy security will be threatened as well, as Russia would fully control of the transit of its gas and oil exported to Poland and the EU. Finally, unreformed, pro-Russian Ukraine might be also the source of a massive, illegal migration into Poland49.

iv. Of increasing importance in Poland’s policy towards Ukraine are the issues of historical memory and historical policy. The two countries have a tragic history stemming in particular from events of the years 1943 – 1944, when some 100,000 Poles, and from 10-15,000 Ukrainians, lost their lives in the ethnic borderland regions – mainly Volhynia and East Galicia (until 1939 part of Poland, now in Western Ukraine)50. How that history is remembered and evaluated in Poland and Ukraine are matters of great significance. The key question is whether the Polish population in these two regions was the victim of ethnic cleansing (or even genocide) committed by the Ukrainian nationalists, as Poles argue, or whether the two ethnic groups were engaged in a military conflict, as most Ukrainians historians claim51. The recognition of the crimes committed by the Ukrainian underground is considered by Poland as an important step towards the Europeanization of Ukraine52.

v. Poland aims also at securing its economic interests in relations with Ukraine. Despite its relatively small size, the Ukrainian market is of importance for some Polish
exporters and investors. Polish producers however, in particular those from the agricultural and food sector, encounter problems in accessing the Ukrainian market, which has led more than once to political clashes between the two states (Ukrainian embargos on the import of the Polish meat in 2006 – 2007 and again since 2014). Polish investors are critical of the business climate that prevails in Ukraine—its instability, corruption, and lack of transparency. Poland believes that the Europeanization of Ukraine, i.e. its transformation in accordance with the European standards will create a more predictable and business-friendly environment, helping therefore the Polish business entities cooperating with Ukraine.

vi. In the quarter-century since the breakup of the Soviet bloc, Poland has become an important labor market for Ukrainians. More and more Ukrainian students and people from Russian occupied Crimea and Donbas are also coming to Poland. In 2019 some one million Ukrainians worked in Poland, however this number will probably decrease in 2020 in particularly because of the pandemic of COVID-19. The Ukrainian migration to Poland results from both geographical and cultural proximity between the two countries and a liberal immigration policy Poland has adopted since the middle of the 2000s.

To sum Poland aims not only at developing the cooperation between the Euro-Atlantic institutions and Ukraine, but also at stimulating its internal transformation in accordance with the European (Western) standards. It believes that the adoption of the European values and identity by Ukraine will contribute to the improvement of democratic standards and speed up economic reforms in that country. It will also stabilize the Polish Eastern neighborhood, prevent the revival of the Russian imperialism in the region, help the Polish exporters and investors engaged in Ukraine and facilitate a common Polish-Ukrainian understanding of the difficult history of the two countries.

Russia’s goals towards Ukraine. The policy of Russia towards Ukraine is largely influenced by 19th century imperial tradition which considered the Kyiv Rus’ as the cradle of
the Russian statehood and Kyiv as “mother of all the Russian cities”\(^{54}\), claiming that a separate Ukrainian ethnos and language “never existed, doesn't exist, and couldn't exist”\(^{55}\). Concrete aims of the Russian policy are not easy to reconstruct, which is due to the opaque nature of the decision-making system in Russia\(^{56}\) as well as the major change in Russian-Ukrainian relations in 2014, when Russia launched an undeclared war against its neighbor.

i. The Russian Federation considers Ukraine, as well as Belarus, to be part of the same historical and cultural space as itself\(^{57}\), dubbed Russkiĭ mir, i.e. the “Russian world”\(^{58}\). Russia wants Ukraine to remain a part of it.

ii. Russia aims at being the leader in the post-Soviet space\(^{59}\), in particular among the countries of the Russkiĭ mir.\(^{60}\) Ukraine is of great importance in this regard; Russian dominance over Ukraine seems a major condition for Russia to maintain (or regain) the status of grand power\(^{61}\). Bilateral relations are therefore to be not only close, but clearly asymmetrical in favor of the Russian Federation\(^{62}\).

iii. Maintaining Russian dominance over the Slavic neighbors, essentially means keeping them out of the Western orbit. That is why Russia has been against a potential accession of Ukraine to NATO\(^{63}\), as well as against its association with the EU.

iv. Even though Ukraine accounts only for some two per cent of Russia’s foreign trade\(^{64}\), it is perceived as an important economic partner for Russia. Russia has been particularly interested in the Ukrainian energy sector, mainly because Ukraine is a major transit country for Russian gas exported to Europe\(^{65}\). Until 2014 the Russian Federation was also dependent on some key supplies from the Ukrainian military and industrial complex (aircraft engines, naval gas turbines), however since the beginning of the war the ties between the countries in this sector were broken down\(^{66}\).

v. Of equal significance have been the social and cultural bonds, which confirm the “Russian world” identity of Ukraine: the presence of a large Russian minority (seventeen per
percent of the population according to the last census carried out in Ukraine in 2001, some eleven per cent in 2016), the status of the Russian language and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which is a part of the Moscow Patriarchate. In the past the latter was one of the main denominations in Ukraine, however its position has been weakened by the war with Russia and the establishment of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine by the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2018.

vi. The vital importance of Ukraine for Russia was clearly confirmed by the events of early 2014, when Russia launched an undeclared war against Ukraine. Its policies went against the principles of international law and considerably damaged the image of Russia internationally, so much so that it was subjected to US and European political and economic sanctions. The Russian policy was due to three reasons. First, Russia wanted to punish Ukraine for the desire to leave the Russkiï mir. Second it aimed at impeding the process of reforms in Ukraine and the attempts at developing ties with the EU. Third, it wanted to use the illegal annexation of Crimea, as an instrument to strengthen the popularity of Vladimir Putin inside Russia.

The key aim of the Russian policy towards Ukraine has been always to keep it (or to make it) a part of the Russkiï mir which seems a necessary condition of its existence and Russia’s dominance over it. The belonging to the Russkiï mir is understood not only as recognizing the leadership of Russia in the region, but also sharing the “Russian-world” identity, culture and values. For this reason the Russian Federation critically assesses Ukraine’s cooperation with the external actors, such as the EU and NATO or Poland, as it might endanger the implementation of the Russia’s desired scenario in Ukraine.
Strategies

**Poland’s strategy towards Ukraine.** Poland’s strategy in relation to Ukraine is composed of three main elements: support for Europeanization of Ukraine, lobbying in favor of Ukrainian interests in the West (in particular in the EU) and backing Ukraine against Russia.

Polish leaders have been consistently encouraging their Ukrainian counterparts to strive to implement European standards and desist from activities contrary to them. They have aimed in particular at sharing the Polish transformation experience with Ukraine, believing it is one of the necessary conditions for the latter to achieve success in its reforms. Poland played an active role in the peaceful resolution of the political crisis during the Orange Revolution (2004), which led to the election of the pro-Western Victor Yushchenko. During the Yanukovych presidency it lobbied the Ukrainian authorities against the authoritarian measures implemented since 2010 (the imprisonment of former prime minister Yulia Tymoshenko being the best example). In early 2014, it tried again, in cooperation with Germany and France, to find a peaceful solution to the political conflict in Ukraine; that time its efforts were however unsuccessful. Ukraine is also one of the major recipients of Polish Official Development Assistance – from 2005 to 2019 the total value of the Polish ODA amounted to some 300 million dollars. Its significance grew in 2014 in connection with the reforms initiated after the Revolution of Dignity and the outbreak of the war with Russia. Poland supports Ukraine in particular in the area of local government reform. This is an important challenge for Ukraine, since its existing system of local government derives from the Soviet era, which means that the local authorities remain weak and dependent on the central authorities, which impedes the development of the country. Overall, however, the effectiveness of Polish aid is limited. Such a situation is due to the lack of will of the Ukrainian elites to implement difficult and costly reforms, to the limited potential of Poland, and finally to important differences in the Polish and Ukrainian transformation experiences since 1989–1991.
Poland has also lobbied for the development of cooperation between Ukraine and the European Union. For many years it has acted in order to modify existing instruments of EU policy in relation to Ukraine and to create new solutions in this area; it has also lobbied for the increase of EU financial support for Ukraine and for the liberalization of the EU visa regime. In 2004 Poland convinced its European partners of the need for EU involvement in the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. In 2008, together with Sweden, it proposed a new instrument addressed to EU post-Soviet neighbors—the Eastern Partnership. In the following year this proposal was approved by both the EU and the Eastern neighbors. In 2011-2013, despite the authoritarian tendencies of the Victor Yanukovych administration, Poland lobbied for the adoption of the association agreement between the EU and Ukraine.

Poland has in particular supported Ukraine’s aspiration to join the EU and called the EU to continue and “open door” policy towards Ukraine and other Eastern Partnership countries, arguing that the membership can become an important instrument of modernization. However, the Polish efforts have not brought fruit. The European Council and the Council of the European Union—bodies representing Member States—have never acknowledged the possibility of Ukraine obtaining EU membership. This overall lack of enthusiasm results from three basic factors: internal problems in the EU, weaknesses in the process of reform in Ukraine, and the costs that its accession to EU would involve. Some member states also fear about relations with Russia, which is against Ukraine becoming closer to the EU.

In the years 1991–2004, Polish-Ukrainian cooperation was not anti-Russian in principle. Both countries however undertook certain projects seeking to reduce their dependence on Russia. The Odessa – Brody – Płock – Gdańsk oil pipeline project is a good example here. Its purpose was to make it possible to send Caspian (Azerbaijan) oil—bypassing Russia—through
Ukraine to Poland, and then potentially on to Western European countries. The project was never carried out\textsuperscript{82}.

As a result of the Orange Revolution it became very clear that, despite the disparity in their size, power, and potential, Poland and Russia could be seen as engaged in a rivalry in Ukraine. In 2004, Russia actively supported the efforts of the Ukrainian authorities to falsify the elections. On the other hand, Poland became actively involved in resolving the political crisis in Ukraine. It considered the democratic election of Yuschenko as its success and believed the weakening of Russia’s influence over Ukraine would be in line with Western interests\textsuperscript{83}.

During the Yanukovych presidency, an important aim of Poland’s policy was the adoption of the EU – Ukraine association agreement. A significant, though undeclared, goal of that policy was to limit Russia’s influence in Ukraine. The Polish authorities rightly judged that the implementation of part the *acquis communautaire* in Ukraine would help rebuild and modernise Ukraine’s economy, reduce corruption, and increase transparency in the political life of the country. Russia would, in effect, lose some of its instruments of influence over Ukraine, which would become less “Russian” and more “European”. The establishment of a DCFTA between the Ukraine and the EU would also make it impossible for Ukraine to join the Russia-promoted Eurasia Economic Union. Such a scenario was favorable for Poland\textsuperscript{84}.

A turning point in the Polish policy towards Russia came in 2014 when Ukraine became the direct target of Russian aggression; this event dramatically altered the perception of Russia in the region. Poland gave up its restrained evaluation of Russian policy and began to openly articulate its fears in relation to both Ukraine and the entire Eastern European neighborhood\textsuperscript{85}. It also demanded that the EU impose and maintain sanctions against Russia, even though this could have an adverse effect on the Polish economy\textsuperscript{86}. It can be counted as a Polish success that sanctions were imposed, initially for a six-month period, but they have been regularly extended by the EU to date.
Poland also took steps to provide material support to Ukraine; this concerned in particular equipment for modernizing optoelectronics systems in Ukrainian military vehicles. It also became involved in training the Ukrainian army. Ukraine counted on receiving arms from Poland, but the latter has been unwilling to provide such help fearing a backlash from Russia. Both countries strengthen defense cooperation. In 2014 Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania launched a common peacekeeping battalion. Last but not least, Polish non-governmental organizations became actively involved in helping the victims of the military conflict in Eastern Ukraine.

Polish strategy towards Ukraine was based essentially on political (diplomatic) and in a lesser way financial and military instruments. The assessment of the effectiveness of that strategy is not unanimous. Since 2014 the Ukrainian authorities have adopted a pro-European foreign policy, however this situation can easily change; besides the internal reforms stay behind. What is more important is the fact that the Ukrainian population in majority supports both the accession to EU and NATO, which was not the case in the past; this is an major step towards the adoption of a European identity. The Ukrainians have also a positive attitude towards Poland. Finally, the Revolution of Dignity and the subsequent Russian-Ukrainian war indicate that Ukraine does not want to be a part of the Russkiĭ mir any more. Most of these developments are in line with the Polish interests, even if Poland has contributed to them only in a limited way.
**Table 2. Support for the membership in NATO and EU in Ukraine (2012 – 2019)**

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<thead>
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<th></th>
<th>NATO</th>
<th>EU</th>
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<tr>
<td>April/September 2012</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2014</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>December 2019</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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**Table 3. Attitude of the Ukrainian population towards Poland (2012 – 2018)**

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<th>Very warm/warm</th>
<th>Very cold/cold</th>
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<tr>
<td>August – September 2012</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2015</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September – October 2018</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>6%</td>
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Russia’s strategy towards Ukraine. After the collapse of the USSR, Russia developed a multilevel strategy aimed at maintaining its influence in the post-Soviet republics, in particular in Ukraine. On the political level it supported authoritarian tendencies and pro-Russian political forces. It backed Leonid Kuchma, especially during his second term (1999–2005) and Victor Yanukovych and it tried to destabilize Victor Yushchenko. Periodically, Russia interfered directly in Ukrainian political life, as during the presidential election in 2004, when it supported the Ukrainian authorities politically, financially, through the Russian media and political advisers. This aggressive Russian policy was possible thanks to the weakness of the Ukrainian political system, its high level of corruption, and the hold over it of a powerful oligarchy, serving as “middle-men” between Russian and Ukrainian power centres.

On the economic level the Russian Federation aimed at maintaining, strengthening, and exploiting (both politically and financially) the dependence of Ukraine on Russia. Russia was the biggest trade partner of Ukraine until 2018, one of major foreign investors in that country and the main provider of the natural gas to Ukraine. Twice during the presidency of Yushchenko, in 2006 and in 2009, Russia stopped the delivery of the gas to Ukraine, which was a major challenge for the Ukrainian economy and contributed to political destabilization of Ukraine and weakened its pro-Western leader.

Russia also used the existing social and cultural ties between the two countries. The Russian media present in Ukraine, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the Russian minority promoted Russia’s concept of bilateral cooperation and fought political ideas, which went against its interests, like Ukraine’s membership in NATO. Russia also skilfully exploited the regional cleavages in Ukraine, between the pro-Russian South-Eastern part of the country and a more nationalistic and pro-European Western and central regions. During the Orange Revolution the representatives of the Eastern regions threatened to divide the country. In 2010 their support brought the pro-Russian Victor Yanukovych to power.
Russian policy on the international level was partially successful. Ukraine was consistently against strengthening the Commonwealth of Independent States. The position of Ukraine was one of the reasons for the failure of the CIS as an instrument of regional cooperation\textsuperscript{100}. Ukraine also refused to join other integration projects launched by Russia, such as the Customs Union\textsuperscript{101} and its successor – the Eurasian Economic Union. At the same time, Russia effectively blocked any attempts, designed to bring Ukraine closer to membership of NATO. Ukraine has never been granted the Membership Action Plan by the North Atlantic Alliance; under Yanukovych administration it declared itself a “non-block” country, giving up its aspirations of joining NATO\textsuperscript{102}. Russia also aimed at impeding the development of cooperation between Ukraine and the EU: in 2013 it was largely under the Russian pressure that Yanukovych resigned from signing the association agreement\textsuperscript{103}.

That decision led to massive protests in Ukraine, which finally toppled Yanukovych. In that context Russia had to redefine its strategy towards Ukraine. Without fully giving up the above-mentioned instruments, it decided to rely on hard power. In March 2014 Russia quickly took over control of Crimea and illegally integrated it within the Russian Federation. The Russian authorities hoped that thanks to the regional divisions in Ukraine, it would be possible to dismember the state by separating the South-Eastern regions (the Novorossiśha) from Ukraine. To this end, in spring 2014, pro-Russian activists and Russian special services tried to take control of the main cities in the region: Donetsk, Lugansk, Kharkiv, Dnipropetrovsk, and Odessa. These activities brought tangible results only in the Donbas, where the strong regional identity made people there more susceptible to Russian propaganda. Since 2014 the Ukrainian authorities have lost the control over the Eastern part of that region, where the “Donetsk” and “Lugansk People’s Republics” have been created. It is worth noting, however, that those two entities survived only thanks to Russia’s direct military interference in the conflict.
At least since 2004 Russia negatively assessed Polish engagement in Ukraine. It viewed the events of the Orange Revolution as being part of a campaign against Russia, planned by the United States and other Western states, including Poland; in consequence Polish-Russian relations considerably deteriorated.

Since 2014 Russia has intensified its activities against Poland, aiming in particular to disrupt the Polish-Ukrainian cooperation. Russia has acted through the agency of political forces favorable to it (the far right National Movement, some ruling Law and Justice circles, and the out-of-parliament “Change” party); pro-Russian circles and non-governmental organizations (here an important role was played by some “Borderlands” associations grouping Poles originating from the eastern lands of pre-1939 Poland, which are now part of Ukraine and Belarus); websites, internet “trolls” and “bots”. Some of those entities enjoy financial support from Russia (the “Change” party), others act on Russia’s behalf for ideological reasons. Russia’s basic goal has always been to drive a wedge between Poland and Ukraine, primarily by opening up old historical wounds.

Russia has not limited its actions to information interference. In the years 2014–2017, there were several acts of vandalism, and even terrorism, against Polish facilities in Ukraine and Ukrainian facilities in Poland (the Polish consulate in Lutsk was fired upon with an anti-tank grenade launcher; a monument in the Ukrainian cemetery in Pikulice, near Przemyśl, was destroyed). Some of these events may be deemed to have been inspired by Russia, as they were first reported by the Russian or pro-Russian media. The perpetrators of those crimes have never been caught, but the incidents negatively influenced Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Despite a multilevel strategy adopted by Russia, its basic aim – keeping Ukraine within the Russian zone of influence as a key part of the Russkiĭ mir – has not been realized. Russia has “lost Ukraine”. On the political level the return to status quo ante in Russian-Ukrainian relations seems unlikely, as the ongoing war has deeply divided the two countries.
social level the image of Russia in Ukraine has considerably worsened. However the Russian still has some influence over Ukraine, in particular thanks to a successful establishment of the two separatist pro-Russian “Peoples’ Republics” in the Donbas. Besides Russia has contributed to the deterioration of the Polish-Ukrainian relations, in particular through the use of the historical memory issues.
Table 4. Attitude of the Ukrainian population towards Russia (2012 – 2018)

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<th>Very warm/warm</th>
<th>Very cold/cold</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>August – September 2012</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2015</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September – October 2018</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 5. Attitude of the Ukrainian population towards the situation in Crimea and in Donbas (2019)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Fully/rather agree</th>
<th>Fully/rather disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia’s actions toward Crimea is an illegal invasion and occupation of independent Ukraine</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The war in the Donbas was launched by Russia and local pro-Russian groups</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The international context

The Polish-Russian competition over Ukraine should be analyzed through the dual prisms of relations between Poland and the Russian Federation and relations between Russia and the West, which Poland has become a part of.

Since the beginning of the 1990s Polish-Russian relations have been highly conflictual. The two countries have opposed each other on a range of issues. The points of contention include: firstly, the scope of Poland’s sovereignty (accession of Poland to the North Atlantic Alliance and the military presence of the NATO in the new member states); secondly, energy geopolitics (terms of supply of Russian gas to Poland, energy relations between Russia and the EU); thirdly, common history (in particular the role played by the USSR during the Second World War); and finally differing visions of the common neighborhood, in particular Ukraine\textsuperscript{111}.

Periodic attempts were made to improve bilateral relations. The post-communist Democratic Left Alliance (SLD), which came to power in 1993, tried to normalize relations with Russia despite discord over security issues. Russia was uninterested in Polish proposals, because of the asymmetry of potential between the two countries\textsuperscript{112}. In 2005, when after double elections SLD and its allies lost both the governmental majority and the post of the president, the Polish-Russian relations were in a deep crisis after the Orange Revolution\textsuperscript{113}.

After the Civic Platform (PO) took power in 2007, an internal document of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs stipulated that the possibility of Russian expansion in the post-Soviet space was limited and that Polish-Russian relations should be improved\textsuperscript{114}. In the same year Vladimir Putin supposedly made a proposal to Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk inviting him to take part in the partition of Ukraine. It seems that the East of the country was to go to Russia and the Western regions to Poland\textsuperscript{115}. In 2009 Putin paid an official visit to Poland. This
reset policy however did not brought long-time results and in 2014 the Civic Platform cut off contacts at the highest level with Russia, as the latter had launched a war against Ukraine.

The relations of Russia with NATO and the EU have also undergone a considerable evolution since the beginning of the 1990s. The North Atlantic Alliance aimed at establishing a partnership with Russia, as confirmed by the Founding Act on Mutual Relations, Cooperation and Security between NATO and the Russian Federation (1997) and the establishment of the NATO – Russia Council (2002). Both of them shared some common interests, which was visible especially after September 11, 2001 and the beginning of the global war on terror. However important disagreements hampered the development of bilateral cooperation, in particular following the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia (1999) and its progressive enlargement towards the Central European states. Since the Orange Revolution in Ukraine bilateral relations progressively deteriorated, the milestones being Vladimir Putin’s speech in Munich (2007), the Russian-Georgian conflict (2008), and finally the war in Ukraine. Currently NATO and Russia do not perceive themselves any more as potential partners, but rather as threats.

Russia-EU relations have followed a similar pattern. After the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation became the most important partner of the EU in the post-Soviet space. The institutionalization of bilateral relations—adoption of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (1994) and the concept of four “Common Spaces” (2003–2005)—however, did not lead to an increase of mutual confidence. The most important reason was that these arrangements hardly touched the most critical areas of cooperation, such as the gas trade. The Russian Federation became increasingly wary about the engagement of the EU in the post-Soviet space through such initiatives as the Eastern Partnership. It launched new integration projects, such as the Customs Union and the Eurasian Economic Union as alternatives to the
EU policies\textsuperscript{120}. The long-term crisis in EU-Russia relations reached a head as the result of developments in relation to Ukraine in 2014\textsuperscript{121}.

The increasingly tense relations between the EU and Russia, in particular their competition in the common neighborhood have been fostered not only by their fight for influence in the region, but also by a conflict of values. European integration is based on such ideas as democracy and the rule of law, while the Russian Federation promotes the concept of “sovereign democracy” and disrespects the law. The EU promotes international law, while Russia is a revisionist power, aiming at changing the post-Cold War status quo\textsuperscript{122}.

Conclusions

The analysis of the relations in the triangle Poland – Russia – Ukraine confirms that at least since 2004 Poland and Russia have competed for Ukraine. Such situation has been the results of conflicting goals of the two countries towards Ukraine. Their competition has been also an element of a broader antagonism between Poland and Russia, which has dominated the bilateral relations for most of last thirty years; it should be also perceived through the prism of the growing tensions between the Russian Federation on one side and EU and NATO on the other. The existing situation is of interest in particular because of a clear disbalance of potential between the two competing states in favour of the Russian Federation, which is only partially compensated by Poland’s membership in the EU and NATO.

The results of the Polish-Russian competition over Ukraine are not easy to assess. Basically since 2004 Ukraine has become less “Russian” and more “European”, which is confirmed in particular by the signature of the association agreement with the EU. Such change is conform with the goals of the Polish policy towards Ukraine. However the internal transformation in Ukraine has proved to be long and difficult and its final results remain uncertain. Besides Russia has not fully given up the aim to bring Ukraine again to the Russkii mir and seems determined to achieve its goals via all available means, including the military
ones. Finally, it should be stressed that the evolution of Ukraine is not due only to external factors, in particular the instruments used by Russia and (to a lesser degree) by Poland, but it largely depends on the internal political, economic and social factors, its both neighbours cannot easily influence.

Polish-Russian competition over Ukraine is basically conform to the theoretical predictions. Both countries have conflictual high-priority interests concerning their Ukrainian neighbor. Their competition is aggravated by the fact that neither country trusts the other because of a multitude of issues that divide them, including political values. Besides, it must be noted that Russia is a revisionist power, which aggravates the conflict. The differences dividing Poland (or in a larger sense the Euro-Atlantic institutions) and Russia are of great significance to Ukraine, because they largely prevent any agreement between the two neighbors of Ukraine which could be made at the detriment of its interests (like the one Putin supposedly proposed to Tusk).

The analyzed case diverges from the realist concept of competition in two aspects. Firstly, if Russia’s goal was to keep Ukraine within its zone of influence, Poland aimed to integrate it within the Euro-Atlantic structures, it is a member of, but certainly not the leader; Polish policy cannot be interpreted therefore as “imperialistic” aiming at domination over Ukraine, according to the reasoning of Morgenthau. It is rather an example of how the European integration and the membership in the North Atlantic Alliance have been used by Poland in order to realize its national interests in relation to Ukraine.

Secondly, the competition for Ukraine has focused largely on its identity, Russia trying to maintain it within the Russkiï mir and Poland doing its best to bring about the “Europeanization” of Ukraine. Such situation goes clearly beyond the framework of the realist theory of international relations. On the other hand it can be easily explained using the constructivist paradigm. Both Poland and Russia have wanted Ukraine to be similar to
themselves. Such solution has been perceived by both Polish and Russian authorities as a condition to guarantee respectively Poland’s and Russia’s interests in Ukraine and to strengthen their security in the region. In case of Russia, it was also an important element of its great power policy aiming at maintaining or requiring the leadership among the republics of the former USSR.

The analyzed case confirms the utility of the realist concept of competition in international relations. However the subject of this competition and the instruments used by Poland and Russia go far beyond the assumptions of the realist theory of international relations and can only by explained by using alternative paradigms, in particular the constructivism.


7 Morgenthau, *Tragedy*, 50-83. The third possibility is the policy of prestige, which is rarely an end itself, but more often an instrument of policy of either status quo or imperialism (Morgenthau, *Politics*, 84).


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18 Wendt, *Social Theory*: 177, 232.

19 Mazarr et al. *Understanding.*


41 “Ukaz Prezydenta Ukrainy pro rishennia Rady natsionalni bezpeky i oborony Ukrainy vid 6 travnia 2015 roku «Pro stratehiu natsionaloi bezpeky Ukrayny»”, 26 May 2015, https://zakon0.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/287/2015 (accessed 18 July 2019). Because of the scope of this paper, it focuses mainly on Ukraine-EU relations and their perception in Poland and in Russia. However it should be stressed that both countries are also deeply divided by the issue of the Ukraine-NATO cooperation.


44 A. Szeptycki, Contemporary Relations between Poland and Ukraine. The “Strategic Partnership” and the Limits Thereof (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2019): 61–67.


47 Szeptycki, Contemporary Relations, 63.


97. Sasse, “The ‘New’ Ukraine”.


106 This concerns in particular people close to the former ministry of defense Antoni Macierewicz. See T. Piątek, *Macierewicz i jego tajemnice* (Warszawa: Arbitor, 2017).


110 The recent history of Georgia proves that the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 has deeply divided those two post-Soviet states; despite the change of power in Georgia (the departure of Mikheil Saakashvili’s team, which run the country from 2004-2012, and its replacement by the “Georgian Dream”) their relations remain cold. See K. Kakachia, B. Lebanidze, *Georgian Dream Meets Georgia’s Nightmare*, 25 June 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/25/georgian-dream-meets-georgias-nightmare/ (accessed 8 July 2019).


113 Eberhardt, “Poland’s Relations with Russia”.


