

# TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS AFTER THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

## ASSESSMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE EXPERT COMMUNITIES IN POLAND, GERMANY AND THE US

CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT INDICATE THAT TRANSATLANTIC UNITY IS NEEDED NOW MORE THAN IT EVER HAS BEEN SINCE 1989. THE CONFLICT COULD LEAD TO STRENGTHENING IT AND FORCING TRANSATLANTIC LEADERS TO UNDERTAKE CONCRETE MILITARY, ECONOMIC OR EVEN SOFT-POWER RELATED ACTION TOWARDS RUSSIA. ONE CAN ASSUME, HOWEVER, THAT THE CONCEPT OF A NEW COLD WAR IS RATHER EXAGGERATED.

THE FUTURE OF TRANSATLANTIC COOPERATION DEPENDS ON THE 2016 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN THE USA. IN POLAND, HILARY CLINTON IS BELIEVED TO BE A PRESIDENT WHO WOULD BE MORE INVOLVED IN EUROPEAN AFFAIRS THAN OBAMA. TRUMP, ON THE OTHER HAND, IS UNPREDICTABLE AND POSSIBLY PRO-RUSSIAN. HIS FOREIGN POLICY IS AN ENIGMA

THE ELECTION POSES A CHALLENGE FOR THE CURRENT POLISH GOVERNMENT. A CLINTON ADMINISTRATION WOULD PROBABLY CONTINUE THE EFFORTS OF THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION TO DIPLOMATICALLY ADMONISH THE POLISH GOVERNMENT FOR ITS UNDEMOCRATIC MOVES. TRUMP'S ADMINISTRATION MIGHT NOT, BUT HIS "FLIRT" WITH PUTIN COULD RESULT IN LOSING A MAIN ALLY IN INTERNATIONAL POLITICS, WHICH THE US IS OFTEN, PARTICULARLY AMONGST THOSE IN THE RULING PARTY IN POLAND, BELIEVED TO BE.

ALEKSANDER FUKSIEWICZ, AGNIESZKA ŁADA, ŁUKASZ WENERSKI

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# **TRANSATLANTIC RELATIONS** AFTER THE RUSSIA-UKRAINE CONFLICT

ASSESSMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS  
OF THE EXPERT COMMUNITIES  
IN POLAND, GERMANY AND THE US

Serious and deep cracks in the transatlantic community appeared in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when Western Europe, its people and elites, strongly opposed the US military intervention in Iraq. Poland and other Central European countries supported this intervention both politically and militarily, which led not only to profound differences and animosity between the US and Europe, but also to a division into “old” and “new” Europe. The failure of the US intervention in Iraq had serious and permanent consequences for the transatlantic community. In Germany, but also in Poland, there was disappointment in their cooperation with the United States. Moreover, the administration of President Obama, who had taken office on a wave of criticism of the domestic and international policies of Bush, made the famous “pivot to Asia” at the expense of transatlantic relations and involvement in European affairs.

This era of transatlantic “quiet” is now over due to internal and external changes in the policy of Russia, with its significant authoritarian retreat from democracy and its military aggression towards Ukraine. The feeling of insecurity in the Western world has led some commentators and political analysts to the thesis of a “new Cold War,” discussed in Poland, Germany and the United States. This analogy, also vigorously challenged by some experts, has brought to the agenda the question of how the new Russian policy, specifically as it regards the Russia-Ukraine conflict, will impact transatlantic cooperation. Will it become a catalyst for the re-strengthening of political, economic and military cooperation, or on the contrary, will it consolidate the existing divisions between America and Europe and within Europe itself?<sup>1</sup>.

Challenges related to the Russia-Ukraine conflict indicate that transatlantic unity is needed now more than it ever has been since 1989. The conflict could lead to strengthening it and forcing transatlantic leaders to undertake concrete military, economic or even soft-power related action towards Russia. One can assume, however, that the concept of a new Cold War is rather exaggerated.

There are still many areas of dialogue with Russia, and today’s confrontation is also not comparable to that of the Cold War. We live in a multipolar world. Russia is no longer a military superpower compared to the times of the USSR,

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<sup>1</sup> This was to become one of the key questions of research undertaken by the Institute of Public Affairs. This paper is a summary of the report resulting from that research. In-depth interviews were conducted in Poland, Germany and the US during February-May 2016 based on a questionnaire, and to widen the analysis, expert opinions were confronted with those of leading opinion-forming media in Poland and Germany. See: Wpływ konfliktu rosyjsko-ukraińskiego na stosunki transatlantyckie. Perspektywa Polski, Niemiec i USA [The impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on transatlantic relations. Perspectives of Poland, Germany and the US], Warsaw 2016, Institute of Public Affairs.

and for the US it is just one of many elements on the global agenda. The current conflict with Russia also lacks the ideological clout that was crucial during the Cold War. Another difference is that having lost its “military superpower” status, Russia’s code of conduct is different than during the Cold War – the Kremlin is less dangerous but more unpredictable.

Some experts in the US, however, are still considering whether the current global situation may be a pre-condition of a “cold war 2.0”, with empires competing with each other, but based on a different sociological, political and economic approach than during the Cold War.

## Transatlantic response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict

There is a consensus in the three countries that Russia broke international law with its annexation of Crimea, and so in this matter the responsibility lies clearly on its side. Putin is not seen as a reliable partner. German experts close to the Social Democrats are the only ones to point out mistakes made by the European Union, for instance, not consulting the Ukraine Association Agreement with Russia sufficiently early. According to these opinions, Russia’s negative reaction could have been foreseen even though nobody could have expected military intervention.

Russia’s policy towards Ukraine in early 2014 came as a huge surprise for the US administration and independent analysts. After the Euromaidan, they expected economic rather than military retaliation against Ukraine from the Kremlin. In the US, there is no consensus regarding an assessment of the US reaction to Russia’s aggressive policy in Ukraine. Analysts who traditionally have closer ties with the Republican party and are in favour of an active US international policy see the USA’s reaction as insufficient. Experts associated with the Democratic party are more moderate with their comments, claiming that the engagement has not been perfect but has definitely been substantial, as the US has covered economic, political and military support.

Both in Germany and Poland, the reaction of the Transatlantic community to the conflict is assessed positively. For them the main achievement, or even success, was maintaining the unity of the European Union, as well as the West. In Poland, it is very often stressed that the crucial role in keeping this unity was played by Germany. Not only did Berlin successfully advocate (which for some was a surprise) for European sanctions against Russia, but it also was able to restrain the US from what most experts perceive as over-reaction (e.g., providing weapons to Ukraine). Imposing sanctions is a personal success of chancellor

Angela Merkel, who faced resistance not only from some states (e.g., France), but also from German politicians. The chancellor's significant engagement is also stressed in Germany. The German assessment of the Polish reaction is ambiguous. On the one hand, there is a consensus that "Poland was right in claiming that we should not have trusted Russia as it is able to attack militarily." On the other hand, while Christian Democrats tend to support the Polish position, Social Democrats criticize it, claiming it is too sharp towards Russia.

The important role of Germany in shaping EU policy towards Russia was also valued in the US. Berlin has become a key partner of Washington with regard to Russia and the main European power responsible for stabilizing the situation in the region.

As regards the American reaction, President Obama was strongly criticized by some German experts for claiming Russia was (only) a regional power. According to them, this had a provocative impact on Moscow. In Poland, opinions about the US reaction to the conflict vary. Some experts say that the US engagement was too modest and not firm enough, shifting the sole responsibility of solving the crisis to Europe. Others say that Washington was ready to act more strongly (e.g., by providing lethal weapons to Ukraine), but restrained itself in order to maintain unity with Europe (which was not ready for such a strong reaction).

There were, however, both in Germany and Poland, some critical opinions on this topic. Although the sanctions were a success, they were the obvious minimal step to be taken and perhaps, not sufficient. In both countries, some suggest that there should have been a more determined reaction (e.g., providing weapon to Ukraine). In Germany, this position is represented mostly by the Christian Democrats. The Social Democrats are in general much more focused on dialogue with Russia. In Poland, opinions regarding the decision not to provide weapons to Ukraine are also varied. In both countries, there are experts claiming that the decision of not sending weapons was a mistake, because weapon supply would have increased Russia's costs of aggression and could have had a discouraging effect for further escalation. On the other hand, others consider this the right decision, because providing weapons would have led to escalation and more victims. On the basis of this research, one cannot judge which opinions prevailed.<sup>2</sup>

In all three countries, there is a consensus that there are no reasons to lift sanctions before Minsk II is implemented by Russia.<sup>3</sup> The US administration is

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<sup>2</sup> In IPA opinion polls from 2015, 50% of Poles were against sending weapon to Ukraine, 35% were in favour. See: Baltic Group. Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia in search of common interests, Warsaw 2015, Institute of Public Affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Sanctions resulting from the annexation of Crimea would stand in any case, because the peninsula is not expected to be returned to Ukraine.

not planning on lifting sanctions so long as the Minsk agreements are not fully implemented. The future of EU sanctions remains less clear.

## Russia as a (military and non-military) threat to Europe

The Russian aggression in Ukraine, especially the annexation of Crimea, has changed the image of Russia in Germany and the US. In Poland, it was rather seen as a confirmation of Polish fears that had been long expressed and to some extent underestimated in the West.

Poles believe that Russia poses a threat to the Eastern members of NATO and the European Union. Its aggressive politics in the Ukraine have only strengthened this assessment. Russia has recently carried out a successful modernization of its army, in which significant funds were invested, and this process continues. Moreover, the Russian army has had an opportunity to test its combat capabilities not only in Ukraine, but also in Syria. Russian military doctrine still defines NATO as an enemy. This does not mean, however, that in the foreseeable future one should expect a military attack from Russia. On this question, there are various opinions in Poland, with the “no” option prevailing. However, what causes the most anxiety is the fact that Russia in this regard is unpredictable.

In Germany, there has been a significant transformation in views regarding Russia. Although a change in opinion on Russia among the German political elites could be observed for some time – even before the Russian aggression on Ukraine – it was the annexation of Crimea that banished all illusions. Both Russian policy and Vladimir Putin have a very negative image in Germany now, similar to the Polish view of Russia. German experts are divided when it comes to the possibility of Russian military actions against NATO members. While the Christian Democrats believe Russia does pose a threat, the Social Democrats are not fully convinced. It is commonly agreed, however, that Germany will react according to Article 5 of the NATO treaty if needed.

In the US, there are differing opinions on Russia amongst the authorities. The Department of Defense and the military are much more negative than the presidential administration in their views on Russia. While some generals see Russia as the number one threat, the administration is also strongly critical of Russia when it comes to the Kremlin’s involvement in Ukraine but reluctant to isolate Russia on the international stage. Moreover, the annexation of Crimea and the presence of Russian soldiers in the war in Donbas was the final argument in the US for dismissing the “reset” policy. The American strategy

towards Russia turned out to be wrong, as it had been assumed that although Russia has serious internal problems, it could be a rational international partner that posed no military threat to its neighbours. Russia's aggressions in Georgia had been wrongly understood as a one-time action that would not be repeated.

Nevertheless, according to US experts, there is a low-probability that Russia will decide to go for a full-scale military operation against any NATO member, even when considering the Baltic states, which would seem to be the most probable target for Russia.

Even theoretical discussions regarding the possibility of a Russian military intervention trigger deliberations whether NATO member countries would be ready to collectively react in accordance with NATO's Article 5. Some experts seem to doubt it. If anyone is going to react, it would probably be the USA, with the European members of NATO tending to be more hesitant.

#### Russia as a threat to Western values?

What is crucial from the from the Polish perspective is that Russia should be unequivocally assessed as a threat to Western values in Europe, because its far-reaching goal is the disintegration of the West. Russia has been trying to take advantage of weaknesses in the various European states resulting from the refugee crisis and the rise of populism to initiate this disintegration. This scheme includes financially supporting radical political movements in Europe, for instance the French National Front (Front national) and a (marginal) pro-Russian party in Poland, as well as non-governmental organisations and think tanks disseminating Russian propaganda. These activities are aimed at weakening European and Transatlantic unity – here the similar view is represented in Germany, deepening divisions and spoiling the West's image. The reason for these activities lies in the fact that European liberal and democratic values threaten the Russian establishment as well as Russia's undemocratic regime.

Additionally, there is a strong disappointment in Poland, where it is believed that the West underestimates Russia's behaviour and is not seeking a proper and firm response to it or else it cannot find the proper tools. On the other hand, German experts are quick to point out that the problem of the spread of Russian propaganda in Europe has been finally noticed by the German public and among elites. The propaganda itself is not seen as a real danger to Western order and democracy.

American opinions also seem rather calm on this issue. The growth of radicalism (benefitting the Kremlin's view of politics) doesn't automatically mean that democratic values are endangered in the EU, because they have always been present in Western civilization. Other voices raise strong concern that democracy in Europe still needs to be nurtured and strengthened, particularly in Central Europe, but also in the Western European countries

(France, for example). Russian activities, however, could cause more serious consequences than is commonly believed; for instance, if the US presidential elections are won by the unpredictable (and possibly pro-Russian) Donald Trump, and parliamentary elections in France by the National Front. It has been emphasised, however, that it is Europe itself, not Russia, that is a source of all those (non-military) threats. Russia is only trying to take advantage of them.

## Looking to the future – more or less America in Europe?

Opinions in Poland and Germany about the need for America's future involvement on the Old Continent differ. In Poland, it is generally believed that both Europe and Poland still need American engagement, and the Russia-Ukraine conflict underscores this fact. What is needed is a kind of "US return to Europe," and due to the conflict in Ukraine, this is actually taking place. In Germany, the opinions are different. The USA cannot take responsibility for European security upon themselves alone, if only due to their high engagement in other regions. It is Europe that must deliver.

There is, however, agreement that Europe spends far too little for its security and has no real security policy, and that NATO, in fact, depends predominantly on the Americans. European states are criticized for insufficient spending on defence.

Obviously, it is the military presence that is the crucial element of the American engagement in Europe. In Poland, there is scarcely any discussion about the need for such a presence, as there is a consensus among the main political forces and mainstream experts that American (and NATO's) military presence on the territory of Poland and other countries in the region is needed. Its absence is treated as a shortcoming, a failure of the process of integrating these countries into the Alliance. In Germany, opinions differ – some experts back the Polish position, but others are afraid that any NATO presence in Eastern Europe (including Poland) will only provoke Russia.

In the US, there is also an expectation that the US will engage more in military cooperation with Europe and provide security for NATO members. A new security strategy and long-term military and financial support for Europe is necessary. Nevertheless, Europe is expected to take on more responsibility for its own safety. European leaders have high expectations from the US but at the same time are not ready to fulfill their own commitments. The most suggestive example is the fact that although NATO members have committed to spend 2% of their GDP on the military to make sure the development of their armies is



sustainable, most of the European members of the alliance have never achieved this goal.

#### [The USA and European democracy](#)

Undemocratic actions undertaken by the governments in Warsaw and Budapest, in particular activities against the NGOs in Hungary, have raised expectations that America will engage in defending democracy in these countries, just as it was engaged in their democratic transitions after the fall of communism. Although it is unlikely that the US will ever engage again on such a scale in Poland, there is a clear and strong expectation that Washington will demand complying with the principles of democracy and the rule of law from the current Polish government at the diplomatic level.

In the US, the decision to decrease US support for the development of democracy in the countries of Central Europe is sometimes questioned, as it seems that the mechanisms of democracy are not as well established in this region as had been previously thought. But others tend to agree that it is no longer the job of the US to support democracy in Europe. It is Europe that should take care of its own problems.

#### [TTIP](#)

As regards the negotiations on TTIP, in Poland it is often interpreted in the context of strengthening transatlantic political relations, even though it is a trade agreement and not a political one. This argument is considered valid and the Russia-Ukraine conflict is given as an additional argument that the Partnership should be entered. It is much different in Germany, where TTIP is seen as a purely economic agreement, highly welcomed by the business community and aggressively criticized by the wider society. It is perceived similarly in the US, although it is claimed that the TTIP negotiations can be a symbol of political unity, even though today it is not that important any more. The administration understands there are too many formal regulations to clarify and the Europeans themselves should be above all unanimous if they want it. Also, even without this agreement we can show one voice and with it we could very well stay very divided.

## The elections

What it comes to the future of transatlantic cooperation, much (if not everything) depends on the 2016 presidential elections in the USA. In Poland, Hillary Clinton is believed to be a president who would be more involved in European affairs than Obama (but not as much as Bill Clinton). She knows Europe and would be a president who at least to some extent would try to restrain Russia's aggressive stance. Trump, on the other hand, is unpredictable and possibly pro-Russian. His foreign policy is an enigma, but nothing positive is expected. Furthermore, the election poses a challenge for the current Polish government. A Clinton administration would probably continue the efforts of the Obama administration to diplomatically admonish the Polish government for its undemocratic moves. Trump's administration might not, but his "flirt" with Putin could result in losing a main ally in international politics, which the US is often, particularly amongst those in the ruling party in Poland, believed to be.

Donald Trump is also perceived to be a threat in Germany. Frank-Walter Steinmeier, known for his diplomatic statements, calls him a "hate preacher". Good cooperation with a potential Trump administration seems unimaginable. The populist rhetoric of this candidate is being compared with the activities of Alternative für Deutschland. His pro-Russian language also gives cause for worry. Possible cooperation with Clinton, on the other hand, would be expected to be smooth and continue along the current line of relations, regardless of the results of the upcoming Bundestag elections in autumn 2017.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Dr Agnieszka Łada**, political scientist, Head of the European Programme and Senior Analyst in the Institute of Public Affairs, PhD in political science. She specializes in the following issues: EU Institutions, Polish-German relations and Germany, Polish foreign and European policy and the perception of Poles abroad and other nations in Poland.

**Aleksander Fuksiewicz** is a political analysis and project coordinator in the European Programme of the Institute of Public Affairs. Master Graduate in European Studies at the Jagiellonian University in Cracow. Author or coauthor of publications about European Union's institutions and decision-making, Polish foreign and European policies; coordinator a IPA research projects.

**Łukasz Wenerski** is a policy analyst and project coordinator at the Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). He is a graduate of the University of Warsaw and of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun. He is a member of the Steering Committee of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum and represent IPA at the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum. His areas of expertise include relations between the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries, especially Ukraine and Russia, and Poland's Eastern Policy.

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Institute of Public Affairs Foundation,  
Szpitalna Str. 5/22 00-031 Warsaw  
tel. (48-22) 556 42 60; isp@isp.org.pl; www.isp.org.pl