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Poland and the Ukraine War: A Geopolitical Analysis

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Spring 2023

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Abstract

Poland's geopolitical role has enhanced since Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. As such, Poland's ambitions have increasingly important implications for regional, European, and global security. The paper attempts to address this phenomenon by posing the following research question: how does Poland pursue its interests in the Ukraine War? Employing qualitative methods on data collected from three formal interviews, one virtual interview, one informal interview, four statements from Poland's leaders, and a variety of secondary sources, the study aims to answer this question modeling Gyula Csurgai's (2019) geopolitical analysis framework. The research question is addressed in two ways. First, the author examines why it is in Poland's interests to support Ukraine in the conflict using seven geopolitical factors. Second, this paper identifies four of Poland's strategic objectives. In doing so, it highlights how geopolitical factors influence Polish strategy and how Poland pursues its geopolitical goals. Overall, the study finds that Poland's motivations in the conflict are multidimensional; additionally, that the Ukraine War presents both a threat and an opportunity for Polish ambitions.

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Introduction

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Poland has emerged as an increasingly important geopolitical actor (Francis, 2023). Arguably, it has been Ukraine's strongest supporter (Francis, 2023). Poland has accepted more than 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees, provided large sums of military aid to Ukraine, and pressured other European countries to support Ukraine (Francis, 2023). Due to Poland's position as an ascending power on the eastern flank of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), its approach towards the Ukraine War significantly influences the security of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). These developments pose a crucial, yet understudied research question: how does Poland pursue its interests in the Ukraine War?

Several past studies have employed geopolitics to study Polish foreign policy; as such, the author believes that a geopolitical analysis may provide a satisfying framework to address this research question (Lanoszka, 2020; Zarobny, 2020). The author will conduct a geopolitical analysis to examine two phenomena. First, the study will explore why it is in Poland's interests to adopt a pro-Ukraine orientation in the conflict. Second, this paper aims to identify and critically assess the tenants of Poland's response to the war.

Literature Review

Given Poland's importance to regional security, several aspects of Polish foreign policy have been thoroughly examined. At the same time, there exists a gap in understanding the underlying factors guiding Poland's response to the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. This exists for three reasons. First, many studies focus on how just one factor — in particular, populism — influences Poland's security strategy (Cadier, 2021; Dyduch & Müller, 2021; Szeptycki, 2022; Varga & Buzogány, 2021). Second, the scholarship on Poland's response to the war has focused

primarily on Polish immigration policy (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). Finally, the recency of the conflict means that past studies on Poland's strategy towards Ukraine must be reevaluated and that current scholarship on this issue is underdeveloped (Chakravarti, 2022; Lanoszka, 2020; Rajca, 2022; Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021).

Since the accession of the right-wing populist Law and Justice Party (PiS) to power in 2015, several scholars have examined the influence of populism on Poland's foreign policy (Cadier, 2021; Dyduch & Müller, 2021; Szeptycki, 2022; Varga & Buzogány, 2021). However, most of these studies focus on how populism influences Poland's relationship with the European Union (EU) or its grand strategy (Cadier, 2021; Dyduch & Müller, 2021; Szeptycki, 2022; Varga & Buzogány, 2021). However, Poland's support for the 2004 Orange Revolution and the Ukrainian government today demonstrates that regardless of political party, Polish leaders consistently support a pro-Western Ukraine (Rajca, 2022; Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). As such, populism does not provide a satisfying explanation for Poland's strategy towards the War in Ukraine.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, the literature has primarily discussed how this event influences Poland's immigration policy (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). In particular, these studies contrast Poland's treatment of Ukrainian refugees with refugees from the Middle East (Krzyżanowska & Krzyżanowski, 2018; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022). While these studies explore some factors — such as common cultural features between the two societies and the representation of Ukrainians in Poland — these explanations alone cannot completely address Poland's

geopolitical strategy in the conflict (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Ociepa-Kicińska & Gorzałczyńska-Koczkodaj, 2022).

The scholarship has addressed Poland's foreign policy strategy in several areas using geopolitics (Chakravartti, 2022; Lanoszka, 2020; Rajca, 2022; Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). Some studies have conducted geopolitical analyses on Poland's grand strategy (Lanoszka, 2020). Others have even highlighted the importance of Ukraine to Poland's strategic objectives (Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021; Rajca, 2022). Yet, most of these studies were conducted prior to Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). Since this event significantly shifted geopolitical conditions in CEE, a reassessment of Poland's strategy in the wake of the war is needed. Given the recency of the conflict, only shorter policy papers have discussed Poland's response to the conflict (Chakravartti, 2022; Rajca, 2022). While these policy papers provide important insights into Poland's strategy, they do not reach the same depth as a full-scale geopolitical analysis (Chakravartti, 2022; Rajca, 2022).

Given the success of past geopolitical analyses in understanding Polish foreign policy, the author believes that this method can be effectively applied to better understand Poland's strategy towards the Ukraine War (Lanoszka, 2020; Zarobny, 2020). This study aims to address the gap in the literature by conducting a comprehensive geopolitical analysis to explain key aspects of Poland's approach.

Research Methodology

With the explicit goal of conducting an in-depth analysis of the geopolitical factors influencing Poland's strategy in the Ukraine War, this study employs qualitative methods. Furthermore, the author took measures to maintain the ethical integrity of the study and to protect human participants.

The study uses a variety of primary and secondary sources to enhance the breadth of the analysis. First, the author conducted interviews with five experts on Polish and European foreign policy. Three formal interviews took place in Warsaw, Poland, one interview occurred virtually, and one informal interview transpired in Geneva, Switzerland. Given the interviewees' expertise on the subject, their responses offer crucial insights into Poland's perspective on the invasion of Ukraine. Second, discourse analysis was conducted on two speeches and two interviews of Poland's leaders. By performing these qualitative methods, the author gleaned more information on the underlying factors and motivations guiding Poland's strategy. Finally, a variety of secondary sources — including academic journal articles, think tank policy papers, and news articles — were employed in this study. These resources contextualize the factors identified in the study and provide important background information.

When interacting with human participants for the study, the author followed several ethical protocols. Prior to each interview, interviewees were informed of the purpose of the study, as well as their rights to stop participation at any time and to remain anonymous. The author did not use an audio device to record the interview and checked with each interviewee that the written transcript of the conversation accurately represented their views. After describing these standards, each interviewee provided oral or written consent to participate in the study.

Analytical Framework

The author believes that geopolitics can help shed light on Poland's approach to the conflict. This is because unlike other foreign policy issues, Poles are remarkably united in their response to the Ukraine War. As Roman Kuźniar, Advisor to the President of Poland during the Civic Platform (PO) government of 2010 to 2015, put it, “the democratic opposition, the democratic government, they would do more or less the same” in response to the Ukraine War

(R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). As such, this study adopts a geopolitical analysis framework proposed by Gyula Csurgai (2019).

According to Csurgai (2019), geopolitical analysis is defined as “not only interdisciplinary but it integrates multiple causes and dimensions of conflicts” (11). In many instances, the major theoretical frameworks of international relations result in unsatisfying answers because of their narrow focus (Csurgai, 2019). The author agrees with Csurgai (2019) that a multidimensional approach is often needed in foreign policy analysis. With the goal of taking a holistic approach, the author will examine seven of Csurgai’s (2019) geopolitical factors: physical geography, boundaries, historical factors, geography of populations, geopolitical representations, natural resources, and economic factors. Studying these factors is intended to shed light on Poland’s geopolitical interests in adopting a pro-Ukraine orientation in the conflict. After this analysis is conducted, the author will include a discussion of Csurgai’s (2019) eighth geopolitical factor — strategy of actors. In this section, the previously identified geopolitical interests will be used to explain Poland’s strategy in the conflict. The author believes that this analytical framework allows for a comprehensive analysis of the research question and of Poland’s geopolitical objectives.

Why Poland Supports Ukraine

As stated in the previous section, this study will examine the influence of seven geopolitical factors on Poland’s pro-Ukraine orientation: physical geography, boundaries, historical factors, geography of populations, geopolitical representations, natural resources, and economic factors (Csurgai, 2019). Each of these factors is multidimensional and impacts Poland’s policy towards Ukraine in different ways. This section will detail the complexity of

each factor, their implications for Poland's security, and how they influence Poland to support Ukraine in the conflict.

Physical Geography

A major element of geopolitics is the influence of physical geography on competition in the international system (Csurgai, 2019). This section will provide a brief overview of Poland's geographic features and how they relate to its approach to the Ukraine War.

Poland has a large land mass of 304,255 square kilometers ("Poland — Country Summary," 2023). Importantly, Poland's terrain is located on the North European Plain, meaning that it is extremely flat and contains few natural barriers (*Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015; Dumont & Verluise, 2016). The North European Plain also extends to Poland's eastern and western neighbors (Dumont & Verluise, 2016). To Poland's north lies the Baltic Sea; however, its sea claims only stretch 12 nanometers ("Poland — Country Summary," 2023; *Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015). Meanwhile, the Carpathian Mountains sit in the southernmost region of Poland (*Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015). Another important geographical feature of Poland is the Vistula River, Poland's largest river, which extends from the Baltic Sea to Czechia ("Poland — Country Summary," 2023).

Poland's geographical configuration has several implications for its security strategy. First, Poland's location on the North European Plain makes it extremely vulnerable to invasions from the east and west; in fact, this is a major reason surrounding powers have repeatedly invaded Poland throughout history (Dumont & Verluise, 2016; *Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015). As such, Poland's security is dependent on its ability to defend its eastern and western borders (*Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015). Second, Poland's access to the Baltic gives it the potential to assert a powerful maritime role in the region ("Poland — Country Summary,"

2023). Finally, the strategic location of the Vistula facilitates Polish trade with countries in the Baltic Sea region and countries in CEE such as Ukraine, Belarus, and Czechia (“Poland — Country Summary,” 2023). Poland’s physical geography ensures the country’s fixation on securing its eastern border and thus its inevitable interest in the outcome of the Ukraine War. Furthermore, Poland’s geographic features give it the potential to be a power player that can significantly influence the conflict.

Boundaries

Throughout its history, Poland’s location between Germany and Russia has significantly influenced its foreign policy (Chappell, 2021). This is because, as seen throughout history, Poland’s flat terrain on its eastern and western borders makes it vulnerable to invasions by these powers (*Poland’s Geographic Challenge*, 2015). While Poland’s western border with Germany is a notable factor in its grand strategy, this study focuses on its eastern boundaries with Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine that most influence its position in the Ukraine War.

Poland shares a border with Kaliningrad, an exclave of the Russian Federation (Żęgota and Mironyuk, 2022). From 1989 to 2014, Poland viewed this border less as a threat and more as an economic opportunity (Żęgota and Mironyuk, 2022). In fact, a visa-free regime was implemented between Poland and Kaliningrad to incentivize economic cooperation (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Since Russia’s invasion and annexation of Crimea in 2014, however, Poland’s threat perception of its border with Russia has heightened. In response to the invasion, Poland ended the visa-free regime on July 4, 2016 (Żęgota and Mironyuk, 2022; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Due to Kaliningrad’s strategic importance in granting Russia access to the Baltic Sea, Russia has also increased its military presence in its exclave (Tulun, 2017). For instance, in October 2016,

Russia moved nuclear-capable Iskander-M missiles and a S-400 anti-aircraft weapon system into Kaliningrad (Tulun, 2017). Russia's militarization of Kaliningrad has renewed fears that Russia would try to invade the Suwałki Gap, the 60- to 70-kilometer Polish-Lithuanian border that sits between Kaliningrad and Belarus (Parafianowicz, 2017; A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Since this development would "cut off the Baltic states from the rest of NATO...the Suwałki Gap is one of the hotspots on the security map of Poland" (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). As tensions between Poland and Russia continue to rise, Poland views its border with Russia as a greater threat today than in the past.

Tensions along the Poland-Belarus border have significantly intensified in recent years. Belarus' close relationship with Russia has always been a source of tension between Poland and Belarus (Konieczny, 2022). Furthermore, insecurity along the Polish-Belarusian border has amplified since Belarus trafficked migrants to the boundary in 2021 (Konieczny, 2022). Since Belarus is closely aligned with Russia and has taken action to undermine Poland's border security, Poland views its shared boundary with Belarus as a significant threat (Konieczny, 2022).

Given the threats that the Russian and Belarusian borders present to Poland, its Ukrainian boundary is of utmost strategic importance. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Poland has viewed Ukraine as a "buffer" between itself and Russia (Szeptycki, 2021, p. 1115). As such, Poland believes it essential to bring Ukraine closer to the West (Szeptycki, 2021). According to the *Kultura*, which influences Poland's foreign policy doctrine, "given the danger of Russian imperialism ... the creation of an independent Ukraine ... is, for Poland, a matter of capital significance" (Szeptycki, 2021, p. 1117). As such, Poland is a primary advocate for Ukraine's accession to Western institutions, including the EU, NATO, and Three Seas Initiative (3SI)

(Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021; Rajca, 2022). Poland's engagement with Ukraine continued even during times when Ukraine adopted a more pro-Russian orientation. For example, Kuźniar viewed former Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich "as kind of a gangster who was representing Russian interests in Ukraine" (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Nevertheless, Kuźniar also stated that former Polish President Bronisław Komorowski "understood his obligation as a person who had to work" with Ukraine (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). To prevent encirclement by Russia and its allies on its eastern boundary, Poland has a considerable interest in encouraging the development of a pro-Western Ukraine (Szeptycki, 2021).

Historical Factors

History plays a key role in Poland's geopolitical approach towards the War in Ukraine. This paper argues that two historical experiences primarily drive Poland's pro-Ukraine orientation in the conflict. Specifically, Poland's history of being repeatedly invaded by Russia, as well as its close and complicated history with Ukraine.

Throughout history, Russia has posed a consistent threat to Poland's sovereignty. At different times during the 19th and 20th centuries, Poland was occupied by Russia (Zarobny, 2020). Particularly influential to the Polish collective memory was the Soviet Union's indirect control of Poland from 1945 to 1989 (Szeptycki, 2021; Zarobny, 2020; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Witold Rodkiewicz, who lived in Poland during this time, recalls that "being under the Soviet domination was present all the time in my consciousness" (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). As a result, Poland is especially sensitive to the threat of a Russian invasion (Gajauskaitė, 2022; Zarobny, 2020). Since independence, Poland has insisted that Russia "would come and we've been warning everybody

they would come” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). This fear of a Russian occupation has resulted in Poland adopting an anti-Russian orientation (Cadier, 2021). The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 only confirmed Poland’s opposition to Russian power. According to Andrzej Szeptycki, “since 24th February, nobody can say that we were wrong” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Poland’s history of and sensitivity to Russian domination greatly influence its support for the Ukrainians in the conflict (Zarobny, 2020).

Poland’s long history with Ukraine also helps to explain Poland’s pro-Ukraine orientation. The two countries share an often-troubled history and complicated relations (Szeptycki, 2016). During the 13th and 17th centuries as well as after World War I, Poland controlled territories in modern-day Ukraine (Szeptycki, 2016). Furthermore, from 1943 to 1944, an estimated 100,000 Poles died at the hands of Ukrainians during the Volhynian Massacres (Szeptycki, 2016). As a result of this past, Russia has asserted that Poland wants to annex territories in Western Ukraine (Kuvaldin, 2022; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Several interviewees strongly denied that Poland holds this motivation, describing this assertion as “Russian propaganda” and “absurd” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). These statements generally align with the Polish government’s actions. Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poland has tabled tense discussions such as those on the Volhynian Massacres to focus on supporting Ukraine in the conflict (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). As a result, it appears that Poland has overcome some aspects of its difficult history with Ukraine to provide strong support to the current Ukrainian government; thus, it remains extremely unlikely that it would invade Western Ukraine (Kuvaldin, 2022; Szeptycki, 2016).

Though Poland does not show an interest in invading Ukraine, its deep historical connections with Ukraine make it invested in influencing the country to turn towards the West (Szeptycki, 2021). According to Kuźniar, “all [Polish] governments were investing in bringing Ukraine closer to the European Union” (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). This objective is so important to Poland that it has even influenced Ukrainian domestic affairs in pursuit of this goal (Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). For example, Poland actively supported the 2004 Orange Revolution, which replaced a pro-Russian Ukrainian government with a pro-Western one (Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). Poland’s deep and complex historical relationship with Ukraine has made it extremely invested in cultivating strong bilateral relations, with the goal of influencing Ukraine to shift in a pro-Western direction (Szeptycki, 2021).

Geography of Populations

Geography of populations is an extremely complex geopolitical factor, covering cultural dimensions such as language, interpersonal relations, and ethnic makeup of populations (Csurgai, 2019). Poland’s shared history with both Russia and Ukraine further complicate this factor. This section will explore the implications of this geopolitical factor on Poland’s orientation in the Ukraine War.

Despite Poland’s anti-Russian stance in its foreign policy, the Polish-Russian relationship is more complex than it appears on the surface (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023; R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Notably, multiple interviewees distinguished Poles’ perceptions of the Russian population from those of the Russian state (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023; R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). In fact, many Poles “look at Russian high culture as an important and valuable influence to follow and welcome” (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023).

As a result, interviewees described Polish-Russian interpersonal relations as “pretty good” and “positive” (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023; R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Given Poles’ staunch opposition to the Russian state, this does not indicate that Poland is shifting in a pro-Russian direction. Rather, this cultural dynamic highlights Poland’s strong attachment to CEE and ambition to play an active, influential role in the region.

Relations between Polish and Ukrainian civil society have always been close but strengthened since the mass migration of Ukrainians to Poland began in 2014 (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Currently, approximately 2.2 million Ukrainians live in Poland (Sieradzka, 2023). Since 2014, Poland has adopted extremely liberal labor migration policies for Ukrainians, enabling more interactions between Poles and Ukrainians (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). Since this policy has contributed to strong economic growth in Poland, relations between Poles and Ukrainians are remarkably strong (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022). As Rodkiewicz put it, Poles “appreciated the fact that Ukrainians are hard-working” (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). When the Ukraine War caused an additional 1.4 million Ukrainian refugees to register to stay in Poland, these relations only strengthened (Sieradzka, 2023). Polish President Andrzej Duda (2022) highlighted this dynamic, declaring that Poland and Ukraine are “two kindred nations” and insisted that “your loved Ones: spouses, parents, children, grandchildren, those millions of people who had to leave Ukraine, fleeing the tragedy of war, also to Poland — are not refugees in our country. They are our guests.” Interviewees shed further light on this relationship by characterizing Ukrainians as “neighbors” and as having “marshal valor” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). The extremely close —

almost familial — relationship between Poles and Ukrainians creates another motivation for Poland to support Ukraine in the conflict.

Cognitive Factors and Geopolitical Representations

These historical factors significantly contribute to how Poles cognitively perceive and represent the conflict. This section will discuss how Poles' geopolitical representations of Russia and Ukraine influence Poland's pro-Ukraine orientation.

Due to its long history of being subject to Russian invasions, Poland views Russia as an imperialist power whose influence must be counterbalanced (Chappell, 2021; Gajauskaitė, 2022; Lanoszka, 2020; Szeptycki, 2016; Szeptycki, 2021). For instance, Zbigniew Rau (2022), Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, insisted that the West "rise up and unite against an ever-reviving imperial hydra — Russian imperialism and its attempts to subordinate Ukraine." One interviewee described Russia as having a "very deeply entrenched imperial political culture" that has "no place in it for middle-sized nations" (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). In fact, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine only confirmed and heightened Poles' fears of Russia's ambitions. While speaking to the Ukrainian Parliament two months after the invasion, an emboldened President Andrzej Duda (2022) declared that "we have long warned Europe about the imperial inclinations of Russia and Putin. Against the desire to restore the influence of the Soviet Union, and perhaps even of tsarist Russia." Given the invasion's effect in augmenting Poland's threat perception of Russia, Poles' desire to counter Russia has drastically accelerated. Indeed, one interviewee attributed the recent deepening of Polish-Ukrainian relations to "the common challenge [of] Russia as an imperial power in our region of the world, who is enlarging" (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). A strong collective

fear of Russian “neo-imperialism” is a significant contributing factor to Poland’s steadfast support of Ukraine (Gajauskaitė, 2022, p. 67).

Beyond seeing Russia as a threat, Poles’ historical experience with imperialism allows them to sympathize with the Ukrainian cause. A common theme in the primary source material was Polish solidarity with Ukrainians in the conflict. Indeed, many Poles appreciate that “the Ukrainians were prepared to fight” (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). President Duda (2022) characterized the Ukrainian effort as a bulwark against tyranny, thanking them “for defending Europe from the invasion of barbarity and new Russian imperialism.” Mateusz Morawiecki (2022), Poland’s Prime Minister, directly associated Poles with Ukraine’s anti-imperialist fight. “I can be so proud with my countrymen how all the country behaved...in the context of supporting Ukraine in their fight for freedom, sovereignty, and independence.” Given Poland’s historical struggles against imperialism, representing Ukraine as a symbol of resistance to Russian aggression make Poles more emotionally attached to the Ukrainian cause. Furthermore, associating itself with this struggle helps to explain why Poland is so persistent in its support of Ukraine.

Natural Resources

Energy security is a major concern in Poland’s foreign policy (Brauers & Oei, 2020). As such, this section will highlight how natural gas and coal influence Poland’s orientation in the Ukraine War.

Poland’s fear of Russian domination has led it to oppose initiatives that bolster the supply of Russian natural gas to Europe in recent years; for this policy to succeed, a pro-Western Ukraine is essential. Prior to the conflict, Ukraine was a major transmitter of natural gas (Sydoruk et al., 2019). In fact, in 2017, 45% of Russian natural gas transported to Europe went

through Ukraine (Sydoruk et al., 2019). A pro-Western Ukraine willing to turn off Russian gas would be a major leverage for Poland over Russia. Furthermore, Ukraine's geographical location presents opportunities for Poland to work with Ukraine to reduce its dependence on Russian gas (Szeptycki, 2021). During the early 2000s, Poland and Ukraine attempted — albeit unsuccessfully — to build the proposed Odessa-Brody-Płock-Gdańsk pipeline (Szeptycki, 2021). This project would have connected Azerbaijani oil to Poland by going through Ukraine (Szeptycki, 2021). Poland has also led cooperation efforts with the EU, with “the idea that maybe we will be buying energy from Ukraine because our energy system is not diversified enough” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Given the potential of a pro-Western Ukraine to help Poland diversify its energy and the threat that a pro-Russian Ukraine poses to this objective, Poland has a significant interest in supporting the Ukrainian government against the Russian invasion.

Poland's dependence on Ukraine as a potential partner for energy diversification is amplified due to its struggles in reducing its dependence on Russian coal. Poland remains extremely dependent on coal for meeting its energy needs; in fact, 80% of Poland's electricity is generated from coal (Brauers & Oei, 2020). Poland's resistance to finding alternative energy sources exists for two reasons. First, the coal industry is a powerful actor in Polish domestic politics and receives strong support from the ruling PiS (Brauers & Oei, 2020). Second, Poland's cooperation with other major European actors such as France “can only be on nuclear energy, because when it comes to electric connectivity, it has to go through Germany and requires partnership with Germany” (E. Dupuy, personal communication, April 4, 2023). While Poland has grown less dependent on Russian natural gas, it “forgot about the other energy sources we have been importing from Russia — especially oil and coal” (A. Szeptycki, personal

communication, March 30, 2023). For example, Russia supplied approximately 40% of the coal used by Polish households before the war (Minder & Erling, 2022). As a result of Poland's decision to stop importing Russian coal in April 2022, the price of coal tripled in just a few months (Minder & Erling, 2022). The War in Ukraine has bolstered Poles' concerns of the country's dependence on Russian coal, making it more likely that Poland will seek alternative energy sources in the future (Minder & Erling, 2022). Since natural gas remains one of the most realistic alternatives, Ukraine's potential in helping Poland diversify its natural gas supply becomes of greater importance to Poland (Brauers & Oei, 2020). Because these conditions could accelerate a long-term transition from coal to natural gas in Poland, they further incentivize Poland to support the Ukrainian war effort.

Economic Factors

Polish-Ukrainian economic cooperation is surprisingly underdeveloped given the two countries' geographical proximity (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). As a result, these factors may not significantly contribute to Poland's pro-Ukrainian position (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Keeping this in mind, this section will evaluate potential economic considerations that could influence Poland's pro-Ukraine orientation.

Although overall economic integration between Poland and Ukraine is not strong, there are opportunities for Polish investors in the Ukrainian market (Борейко, 2021). One of the main reasons that many Polish investors are disincentivized from relying on Ukraine is widespread corruption in the country (Szeptycki, 2021). At the same time, many of these investors believe that a pro-Western Ukraine would ameliorate these roadblocks to investment (Szeptycki, 2021). Furthermore, Poland currently maintains a positive trade balance with Ukraine; as such, a

Ukrainian victory that would move Ukraine closer to the West could make it extremely attractive for Polish investors (Борейко, 2021). This is especially relevant in the years immediately following the conflict. Because Ukraine will need foreign investment to recover from the war, “there will be an opportunity for Poland to get money, to do good things...[and] the opportunity for [building] economic relations” (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Although Polish-Ukrainian economic cooperation is relatively weak at this moment, the potential for Poland to grow its economic ties with Ukraine after the conflict could contribute to its support for Ukraine.

Additionally, Poland’s economy is dependent upon Ukrainian labor migrants (Szeptycki, 2021). In 2019 alone, one million Ukrainians worked in Poland (Szeptycki, 2021). As previously stated, Ukrainian immigrants help meet the Polish economy’s demand for labor; furthermore, Ukrainian immigration is a contributor to stable, long-term economic growth in Poland (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Szeptycki, 2021). The War in Ukraine has only accelerated Ukrainian immigration to Poland, as millions more Ukrainians fled to Poland in response to the full-scale invasion (Sieradzka, 2023). Although these rapid immigration flows may stress Poland in the short-term, the longstanding contributions of Ukrainian immigrants to the Polish economy provide a long-term interest for Poland to maintain strong relations with Ukraine (Duszczyk & Kaczmarczyk, 2022; Sieradzka, 2023; Szeptycki, 2021).

Poland’s Geopolitical Strategy in the Conflict

From analyzing the influence of the seven geopolitical factors discussed above, the author argues that there are four principal tenants to Poland’s pro-Ukraine strategy in the war. First, Poland desires the continuation of a sovereign, pro-Western Ukraine. Second, the country seeks to bolster its own military power to deter a potential Russian invasion and wield more

influence in Europe. Third, Poland aspires to solidify the support it receives from NATO and the United States. Finally, Polish leaders aim to continue and accelerate their energy diversification policies. In this section, the author will detail how the previously discussed geopolitical factors influence each tenant of Poland's strategy, as well as how Poland is implementing its strategy.

Objective #1: An Independent, Pro-Western Ukraine

Poland's first and arguably most significant strategic objective is to defend a sovereign, yet pro-Western, Ukraine. This goal is most influenced by Poland's physical geography, its boundaries, and historical factors. To achieve this aim, Poland has attempted to shield Ukraine from outside pressure while also intensifying its advocacy for Ukrainian accession to Western institutions.

As previously stated, Poland's flat terrain and vulnerability to invasion makes it extremely sensitive to threats from its east and west (*Poland's Geographic Challenge*, 2015). Furthermore, the Polish historical memory of Russian occupation deepens Poland's threat perceptions on its eastern frontier (Gajauskaitė, 2022; Szeptycki, 2021; Zarobny, 2020; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Complete Russian domination of Ukraine would mean that Russia and its allies would surround Poland to its east (Szeptycki, 2021). As a result, ensuring that Ukraine remains an independent, pro-Western state is crucial to Poland's strategy in the conflict.

Poland pursues this objective in two ways: protecting Ukraine from external pressures, yet also advocating its membership in Western institutions. Since the full-scale invasion, Poland has attempted to limit the influence of great powers, such as the United States, on Ukraine's decision making. President Duda (2022) insisted that "any negotiations and decisions taken over Ukraine's head are out of question!" This sentiment was echoed by the interviewees, who stated

that “we will accept everything which has been accepted by the Ukrainians” and “if Ukraine says, ‘we prefer to stop,’ we should all help them implement their decision to stop the war” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023; R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). While Polish leaders insist that they are trying to shield Ukraine from external pressure, they are increasingly advocating for Ukrainian membership in Western institutions. While speaking to the Ukrainian Parliament, Duda (2022) promised to help Ukraine join the EU and admitted that “I am also very keen for Ukraine to join the Three Seas’ Initiative.” By taking this two-pronged approach, Poland can build good will with Ukraine and set the stage for a Western-oriented Ukraine when the war concludes. If Poland is successful in this approach, it can more effectively advance its geopolitical agenda, as a pro-Western Ukraine limits the threat of a Russian invasion of Poland (S. Chakravartti, personal communication, April 18, 2023).

Objective #2: Augment Poland’s Military Power

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, Poland has swiftly acted to increase its military power, as seen by its intention to increase its 2023 defense spending to 4% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (E. Dupuy, personal communication, April 4, 2023; S. Chakravartti, personal communication, April 18, 2023; Harper, 2023). In addition to the previously mentioned geopolitical factors, cognition significantly influences this approach. Poland is pursuing this policy to deter a Russian invasion and enhance its influence in Europe.

As was the case in the last section, Poland’s vulnerability to invasion from the east, the traumatic historical memory of past Russian domination, and the role of a sovereign Ukraine in mitigating a Russian threat influence Poland’s recent military buildup (*Poland’s Geographic Challenge*, 2015; Gajauskaitė, 2022; Szeptycki, 2021; Zarobny, 2020; W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). Additionally, Poland’s history of being imperialized by Russia

and Germany fosters a sentiment of fear among Polish foreign policy makers (Zarobny, 2020). Primarily, this policy is intended to “make Russians think twice before they attack” (W. Rodkiewicz, personal communication, March 29, 2023). However, Polish rearmament also appears targeted to enhance its relative power in Europe. Although Poland has worked closely with Western Europe since the war, it “cannot trust [the Germans and French], how they will behave once the war is over” (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). By becoming “the strongest army in Europe,” Poland “will put an end to the German military hubris” (E. Dupuy, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Beyond countering Franco-German power in Europe, Poland also hopes to “prevent any normalization of relations between the EU and Russia” after the war (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023). While the Ukraine War presents a threat to Poland, it also provides a window of opportunity for Poland to achieve its long-term goal of blocking European-Russian cooperation (Lanoszka, 2020). Therefore, Poland’s pursuit of increased military power has two primary objectives: deter Russia and strengthen its position in Europe.

Objective #3: Increase NATO Unity and American Commitments

Arguably, the Ukraine War has been a “devil in disguise” for Poland because the conflict enables it to strengthen the transatlantic alliance (S. Chakravarti, personal communication, April 18, 2023). History and geopolitical representations have caused Poland to consistently pursue a strong relationship with the United States since gaining independence in 1989 (Gajauskaitė, 2022; Lanoszka, 2020; Zarobny, 2020). The United States’ role in liberating Poland from Soviet control remains powerful in the Polish collective memory. Indeed, President Duda asserted that Polish independence was “brought about thanks to a very decisive American policy conducted by the U.S. authorities, by President Ronald Reagan” (Duda & Biden, 2023). This history and

American military power have resulted in the United States being represented in Poland as the most effective way to deter Russia (S. Chakravarti, personal communication, April 18, 2023). Polish leaders believe that the Western “democratic community [is] represented by the United States of America,” who “carries constantly the responsibility for the security of Europe” (Duda & Biden, 2023). As such, Poland perceives that “regarding security, still the United States is viewed as number one” (R. Kuźniar, personal communication, March 30, 2023).

Prior to the conflict, Poland feared the United States’ pivot to Asia; therefore, it is using the Ukraine War to make itself “the best understood partner of the U.S.” (Gajauskaitė, 2022; E. Dupuy, personal communication, April 4, 2023). Beyond being vocal in its support of Ukraine, Poland has taken other actions to appeal to the United States — including increasing its military spending and reaffirming its support of NATO (Kuvaldin, 2022; Rau, 2022). President Biden’s visits to Poland indicate a growing Polish-American partnership in the wake of the conflict (E. Dupuy, personal communication, April 4, 2023; A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). Indeed, one interviewee admitted that “I don’t remember any period when, within a year, a U.S. president would come twice to Poland. And I do not think it will happen again for some years” (A. Szeptycki, personal communication, March 30, 2023). The War in Ukraine has provided Poland the opportunity to cultivate stronger relations with the United States and extract significant American security guarantees (S. Chakravarti, personal communication, April 18, 2023).

Objective #4: Accelerate Energy Diversification

Due to Russia’s abundance of energy resources such as gas and coal, Poland has long feared a Europe too dependent on Russia for energy; in response to the War in Ukraine, Poland has increased the urgency with which it pursues energy diversification (Brauers & Oei, 2020;

Sydoruk et al., 2019). This policy has two main goals: to increase Polish energy security and to make Poland indispensable in European energy security.

As previously discussed, becoming independent of Russian energy has been a longtime priority of Polish foreign policy (Brauers & Oei, 2020; Sydoruk et al., 2019). Before the Ukraine War began, Poland took several initiatives to reduce its energy imports from Russia (Brauers & Oei, 2020; Sydoruk et al., 2019). Poland completed a liquefied natural gas terminal in 2015 to import natural gas from the Middle East and Norway while also increasing its imports of American natural gas (Brauers & Oei, 2020; Lanoszka, 2020; Sydoruk et al., 2019). Furthermore, Poland was a strong critic of the Nordstream project, which directly connected Russian gas to Germany (Sydoruk et al., 2019).

Since the War in Ukraine began, Poland has intensified its diversification efforts (Scislowska, 2023). For example, it opened the Baltic Pipeline in September 2022 to gain access to Norwegian gas (Rau, 2022). Furthermore, Poland has accelerated its efforts to reduce its dependence on Russian coal since the war began (Minder & Erling, 2022; Scislowska, 2023). Poland halted all coal imports from Russia in April 2022 and approved an American-backed project to build an additional 20 nuclear power reactors in April 2023 (Brauers & Oei, 2020; Minder & Erling, 2022; Scislowska, 2023). Mateusz Morawiecki (2022) explicitly stated the goal of these policies: “not only are we going to be independent of Russian gas, but we can be provider of gas security, gas-related security to the others in Central Europe.” Poland’s central location in Europe enables it to be a major player in transmitting energy throughout the European market; by diversifying its energy supply, it can better compete with countries such as Germany in supplying Europe with energy (Sydoruk et al., 2019). In response to the Ukraine War, Poland

has expedited its energy diversification with the hope of becoming independent of Russian energy and gaining power in European energy markets.

Conclusion

This study aimed to address the following research question: how does Poland pursue its interests in the Ukraine War? Using a geopolitical analysis framework to examine this question, the study had two primary findings. First, when considering seven geopolitical factors — physical geography, boundaries, history, geography of populations, cognition, natural resources, and the economy — Poland’s pro-Ukraine approach aligns with its geopolitical interests. Second, these same geopolitical factors shed light on four pillars of Poland’s strategy towards the conflict: fostering a pro-Western Ukraine, enhancing Polish military capabilities, strengthening relations with the United States, and diversifying its energy supply.

This study’s findings have two main implications for Polish and European security. First, the full-scale invasion of Ukraine presents a significant security threat to Poland. A Ukrainian defeat would have devastating consequences for Poland, as it would result in almost complete encirclement by Russia (Szeptycki, 2021). At the same time, the Ukraine War also opens a window of opportunity for Poland to gain geopolitical influence (S. Chakravarti, personal communication, April 20, 2023). In many ways, this development is already underway; as German Chancellor Olaf Sholz put it, “the centre of Europe is moving eastward” (Nolan, 2022). How Poland grapples with this paradigm will have wide-reaching consequences beyond its own border, especially as the war continues and Polish influence grows.

Poland’s increasing importance in the international system provides several potential avenues for future research; as such, future studies should expand upon the findings and gaps in this analysis. For instance, analysts could use theoretical frameworks outside of geopolitics to

analyze the research question in this study. Furthermore, strategic foresight analyses could provide useful insights as to how Poland's strategy and geopolitical priorities may evolve in the future. Scholars could also analyze how the Ukraine War has changed Poland's standing in the EU, especially as the country prepares to take over the European Council Presidency in 2025 (Duda, 2022). These proposed areas of future research would enable policy makers to better understand Poland's ambitions, scope of influence, and role in regional, European, and global security.

Abbreviation List

CEE: Central and Eastern Europe

EU: European Union

GDP: Gross Domestic Product

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

PiS: Law and Justice Party

PO: Civic Platform Party

U.S.: United States

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