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TRUST IN POLISH-RUSSIAN RELATIONS. IS IT POSSIBLE?

ABSTRACT

To trust or not to trust? Virtually all the actors of international relations, both state and non-state ones have to face this Hamletian dilemma. Understandably, trust constitutes the foundation of all social interactions and systems, including those extending the borders of nation-state. The question of trust in the Polish-Russian relations is crucial enough to be asked not only by scientists but also by societies and decision makers. The aim of the article is to identify the causes of mistrust in relations between neighbors – Poland and Russia.

Key words

trust, distrust, mistrust, Poland, Russia, Polish-Russian relations, mutual perception

1. Introduction

Trust is a luxury. In relations between states, almost no one can afford this comfort. The main reason of that is the principle of limited trust, which is a feature of anarchic international relations. Not only is this rule ingrained in the realist paradigm, but also it is a frequent way of thinking about “the others” by human beings. While people have a natural predisposition to trust the closest family members (parents or siblings), states do not have relatives, who would be the first objects of trust. Children’s trust towards their parents is unconditional. Although, according to Hardin (2009, p. 26), “trust does not apply to a person, we trust, but to the situation in which his or her interests include ours”, generally speaking, it is natural for the interest of parents to include those of their child.

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The situation is different when it comes to the trust between adult people, who are unrelated or between people and not-human actors like e.g. companies or state authorities. Such a situation is more similar to the one which exists between states. In it, unrelated people, governments and citizens or states may trust, but they take into consideration: 1) the so-called normative cohesion (law, morality, tradition); 2) stability; 3) transparency; 4) familiarity and 5) responsibility (Sztompka, 2007, pp. 280–281).

All of these five elements create a sense of security and order and a frame of reference in families, between the institution of state and its citizens as well as between states in international relations.

2. What is trust and why is it such a scarce resource?

According to one definition, trust is “an expectation, which arises in state A (among society, decision makers) to country B about regular, honest and cooperative behaviour, which is based on common norms” (Fukuyama, 1997, p. 26). Other definitions concentrate on different elements of trust. A Polish sociologist, Piotr Sztompka defines trust as “the gambling of the belief of other people’s possible future behavior” (Sztompka 2007, p. 70). The Taiwanese sociologist Nan Lin defines trust in a more detailed manner as a belief or expectation that in the process of exchange a partner will take the interest of the other partner into consideration (Lin, 2001, p. 147).

The luxury of trust existing between states creates the opportunity for more secure and certain actions. It is a consequence of the assumption that the other side will behave advantageously for us or at least will remain neutral. Lack of this luxury (distrust between states) in turn creates defensive barriers caused by the presumption that the other side is going to act against us or to our disadvantage.

All the contemporary states, Poland and Russia among them, being involved in very intensive and dynamic interactions, accompanied by the growing international interdependence, are constantly confronted with the question: to trust or not to trust? Depending on answer, they decide what strategy they choose, more or less: cooperative, competitive or aggressive.

3. Poland and Russia – mutual perception

The Poles and the Russians are both Slavic, Christian and neighbouring nations, which seem quite similar to each other. Despite these similarities, they have not been able to find a common language over the centuries. Wars, mutual grudges

and prejudices as well as lack of understanding and five decades of forced subordination to the USSR, made the Polish-Russian relations mostly unfriendly and almost without a dose of trust.

Paradoxically, in relations between Poland and Russia, neighborhood is a significant source of distrust and reluctance. According to Russian religious and political philosopher, Nikolai Berdyaev “related nations are less willing to understand each other. At the same time, they are more reluctant towards each other than unrelated nations. (...) No one is so alien and incomprehensible as one of us, a relative” (Lazari, 1004, p. 147). A Polish literary critic and essayist Andrzej Drawicz once said that neighbors look at each other more carefully and notice in each other more disadvantages than virtues (Drawicz, 1995). However, the unfriendly feelings which Poles and Russians have for each other, do not exclude mutual attraction, which is however almost always marked by mistrust (Miłosz, 2001, p. 151).

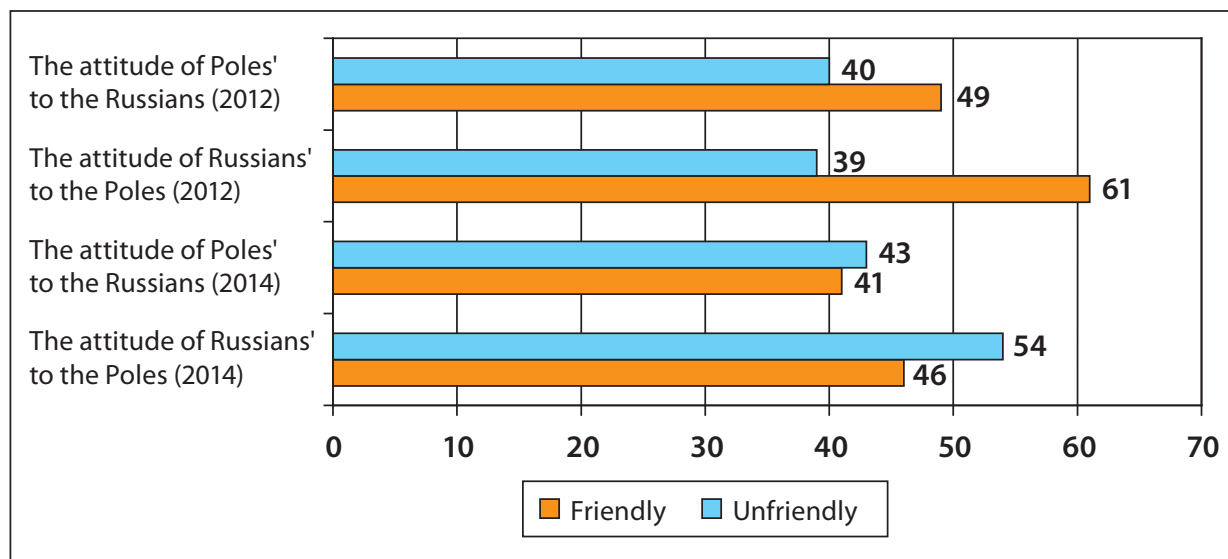
It needs to be stressed that relations between Polish and Russian citizens are slightly different in temperature from the official relations between states. We may find it in the public opinion surveys. Consciously or subconsciously, both the Poles and the Russians make a distinction between their attitudes toward states and nations (*Polska – Rosja. Diagnoza Społeczna 2013. Raport z badań opinii publicznej w Polsce i Rosji*, 2013, p. 9). In comparison to traditionally rather unfriendly relations between our states, contacts between Polish and Russian people are rather good and friendly (*Polska – Rosja. Diagnoza Społeczna*, 2013, pp. 8, 24). It should be emphasized that 2012 surveys differ essentially from those of 2014. Currently, both sides perceive each other in a more negative way. We may also observe a tendency of a more critical attitude to “ordinary people” in Poland and in Russia. The common opinion among the Polish society that Russians and the Russian Federation are two different things has been put in doubt.

A survey conducted by Pew Research in 2014 shows that Poles have the most negative attitude toward Russia. It is not surprising if we bear in mind the issues mentioned, but also because of the nearness of Russia and Ukraine which is afflicted with a conflict in which Moscow plays a significant role.

The main reason for negative opinions about Russia and the Russians among the Polish people in 2014 is mostly associated with: Russia’s policy toward Ukraine, strengthening authoritarian tendencies in Russia, probably inspired by the Kremlin Nemtsov murder and the low scale of protests against Vladimir Putin. Strong social support for the president, who stifles opposition, violates civil rights and invaded a neighboring brotherly country are hard to understand by an average Pole. Growing negative opinions about Polish people in Russia’s

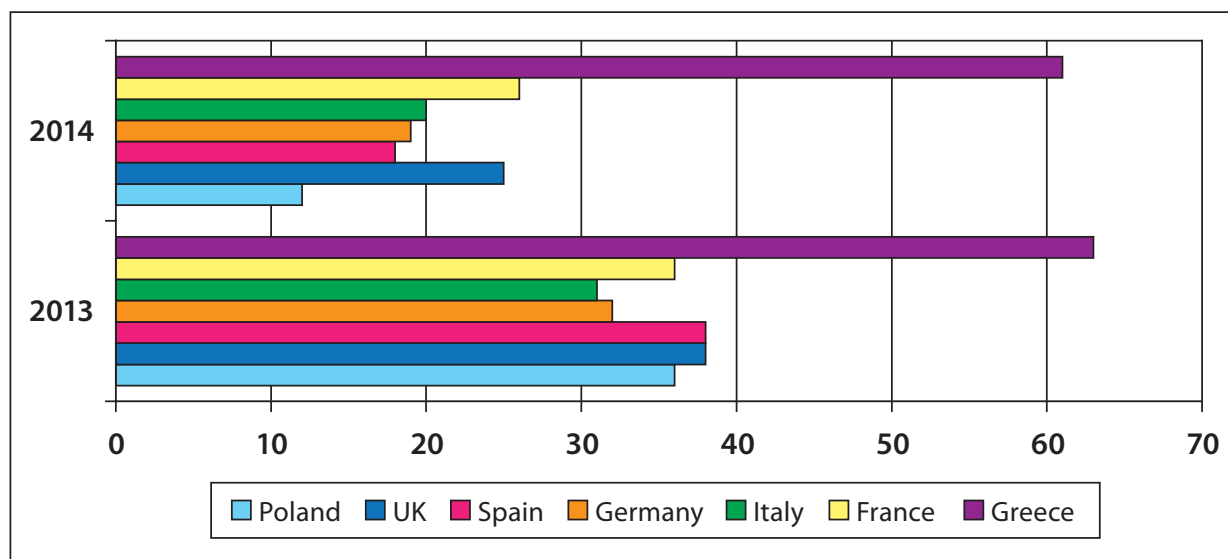
society is probably connected with the media message in which Poland is portrayed as an anti-Russian country, which is against strong Russia with superpower status. The ongoing media war affects the mutual Polish-Russian perception and strengthens mutual distrust.

Diagram 1. Mutual attitudes (%)¹



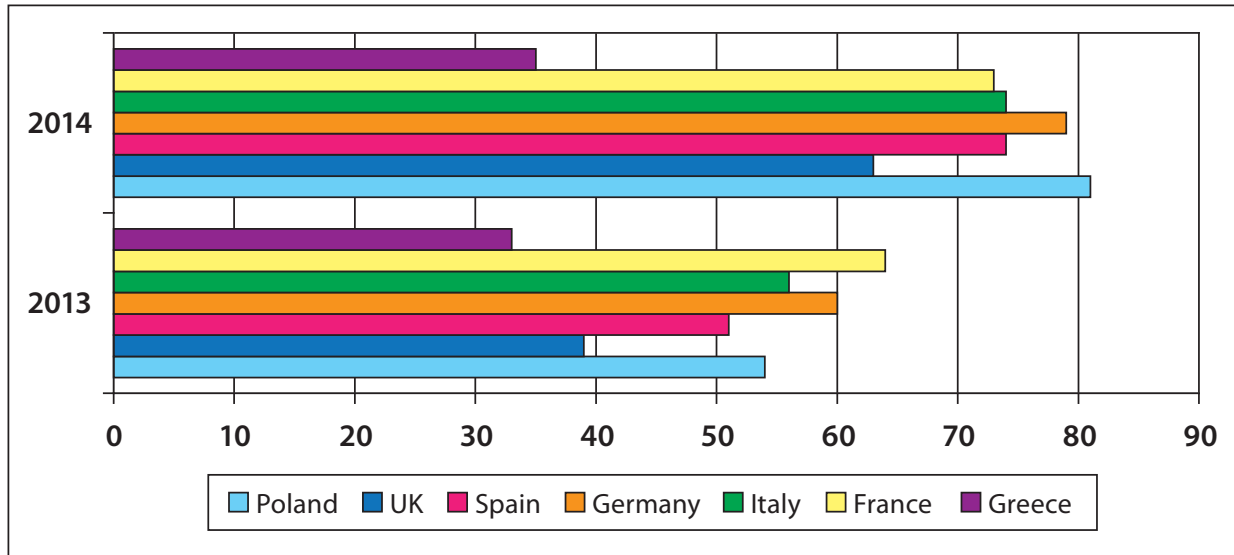
Source: (Polska – Rosja diagnoza społeczna 2015, 2015, pp. 11, 29).

Diagram 2. Do you have a favorable view of Russia? (%)



Source: (Russia’s Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine. Americans’ and Europeans’ Views Sour Dramatically, 2014).

¹ Questions were asked respectively in Poland and in Russia.

Diagram 3. Do you have an unfavorable view of Russia? (%)

Source: (Russia's Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine. Americans' and Europeans' Views Sour Dramatically, 2014).

4. Sources of distrust between Poland and Russia

4.1. The experience of past behaviours

Poland and Russia share a very complex history of conflicts and unfriendly behaviors, which still influences our present relations, each other's perception and stereotypes. We perceive one another mostly as an enemy, foe or a rival than a friend or a partner. Long time ago Poland and Russia have been caught up in a spiral of distrust and they cannot disentangle from it. It can even be argued that the conflict of interests, and consequently general contrariness of the Polish-Russian relations, are their congenital characteristics.

Even though we had some common interests in the past, it should be remembered that a wide community of interests e.g. during the Cold War period was rather illusory, since it was imposed by the USSR. What is important, after the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the conflict of interests between Poland and Russia returned. For example, in the changed conditions, Poland (using the EU instruments) and Russia continue to compete for influence in Ukraine and Belarus. The conflict of interests between both countries is visible as well in connection with differences in European security visions (Polish accession to NATO and support of NATO's enlargement), different goals towards the post-Soviet states and disparate perception of destabilization in Ukraine. Dissimilar political systems functioning in Poland and in Russia lead as well to collision of politics promoting different political systems in the post-Soviet

space – liberal democracy promoted by Poland (and the European Union by the European Neighborhood Policy and the Eastern Partnership) and the so-called sovereign democracy offered by the Russian Federation.

4.2. Attachment to the past

The reverie in the past is Poland's and Russia's curse. It is a curse of its nations too. For both states it is a source of power and true grandeur. Nevertheless, these are the problems which hinder developing proper partnership-based relations.

When it comes to Poland, there is its greatness during the Jagiellonian dynasty and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the past. But there is as well the time of Great Smuta in Russia (The Time of Trouble, rus. Смутное время) and the occupation of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth². The past is as well a time of partitions and Russification of Poland, time of Katyn and Soviet domination when Poland was a country of limited sovereignty. The reverie in the past creates many obstacles. Let's point out two of them. Firstly, it is hard to trust somebody whom we perceive as a foe or a rival. Russia and Poland have done so, during most of their history. And secondly, it is hard to trust somebody who was treated as an ally and turned away. In Russia's perception, Poland after the Second World War was perceived as an ally, who after 1989 was consequently aspiring to NATO membership, the organization perceived by the Russian Federation as a danger and now even as an enemy.

According to Max Weber (1984, pp. 88–110; Grondona, 2003, pp. 101–115), attachment to the past is typical of plebeian religions like Catholicism (Orthodoxy as well). Such societies are also less progressive and less prone to trust. On the second end of the scale are progressive societies which are rooted in the Protestant tradition (Pharisee religion). They are much more open, oriented towards the future and more prone to trust. Falling into first category both states find it even more difficult to trust each other.

4.3. "Impulse of trust" and "impulse of distrust"

The so-called impulse of trust is a penchant for trusting others (Sztompka, 2007, p. 149). Propensity to trust others might be strengthened throughout positive experience, that is by appropriate allocation of trust (Sztompka, 2007, p. 142).

² Current Russian national holiday – the Unity Day (rus. День народного единства) held on November 4 (October 22, Old Style) is a celebration of expulsion of Polish forces from Moscow in November 1612.

Moving it into the sphere of interstate relations, countries and their societies are more prone to trust a state:

- which is proven as trustworthy (we have information about it);
- which has a “good reputation” of being trustworthy;
- that we do not have proven information about its credibility, but we know the history of our relations, which encourage us to trust;
- that we do not have much experience with, but it has not let us down so far;
- which plays specific roles in international relations (e.g. neutral state);
- which is similar to us (culturally, mentally, in terms of political system or by the values);
- the interest of which involves our interests.

Let's try and take into consideration the above in the context of the Polish-Russian relations. When it comes to Poland, firstly, in the eyes of the Polish decision makers and Polish society Russia and the Russians do not have the opinion of a trustworthy partner, even though our partners from Germany or from France often perceive Russia in that way (after the aggression against Ukraine this has been changing). Secondly, what has been mentioned already, Poland has bad experience with Russia and its credibility. Thirdly, Russia is a great power, with ambitions to recreate the world order and to “make international policy” with other great European, and not only European, powers without the agency of the EU, and that is not consistent with the Polish national interests. Fourthly, Russia and Poland and their societies, even if both Slavic and Christian, are different in regard to the political systems, values and visions of Europe and the world order. The latter is connected with different and conflicting interests of Warsaw and Moscow. Let's only mention the case of the US and its presence in Europe.

Talking about the so-called impulse of trust we should not avoid the culture of trust issue. It is “a system of norms – rules and values – concerning trust and credibility” (Sztompka, 2007, p. 223). Culture of trust accumulates and transforms experiences into norms. If results of bets regarding trust are in long term usually positive, the rule of trust, which is crucial for culture of trust, can be created. While states like Japan, Sweden, Norway, Denmark or Germany³ and its societies are included by sociologists into the group of “societies/states of high trust”, Poland and Russia like others post-communist states and its societies are

³ Most of these countries are included into Weber's societies of Pharisee religions.

included into the group of “law trust” (Fukuyama, 1995, pp. 149–266; Sztompka, 2007, p. 271). When it comes to Poland and Russia to a certain degree, their experiences have resulted in a very limited trust in general, but especially towards each other. Culture of trust or actually distrust in the case of Poland and Russia are not given once and for all, they may change as a result of the positive experience concerning trust. Mainly positive Polish experience with the EU partners has been changing Polish culture of distrust to a certain degree.

The inverse of “impulse of trust” is a “impulse of distrust” which is an inclination to denial of trust. This kind of behavior is a consequence of loss of trust or just like in the Polish-Russian relations a result of complicated history of conflicts and mutual resentments. The Poles and the Russians do not trust each other because of recurrent disappointments with each other.

4.4. Similarity and familiarity

The Poles are often taken for the Russians. Our languages are similar as well as our national profiles. However, if we look more carefully we may also see differences. We belong to two different civilizations mentioned by Samuel P. Huntington (1996) – Western and Orthodox. While the Russian culture and identity were built on the basis of the Byzantine legacy, Poland was strongly linked with the Western civilization. It has co-created it as well. It has already been mentioned that we differ on the political, economic grounds but also in the issues of national interests as well as in the state potential and the international status (Russia is a great power and Poland a Middle European state). The international status is not neutral when it comes to trust especially for the weaker state (Poland) toward the stronger one (Russia).

Poland and the Poles belong in the Western European countries and the European Union. The place we feel at home and want to be part of was chosen by the Polish decision makers and the people after 1989. We actively pursued our goal – membership of NATO and the EU. According to sociologists, the sense of activity and subjectivity correlates with trustfulness. Lack of it, just like e.g. after the Second World War, when Poland was incorporated into the Eastern Block arbitrarily by great powers, creates and in case of Poland has created distrust especially toward Russia – the successor of the USSR.

Despite the neighborhood and many similarities between the Slavs, Poles feel least connected with the Russians. According to surveys, we seem to admit closer cultural and linguistic ties with the Czechs and Slovaks (*Sondaż: Polak woli Rosjanina od Ukraińca*, 2013). Also, we feel the most affinity with these two Slavic nations. Similarly, Czechs and Slovaks according to the Russians are perceived

as culturally closer to them than Poles (*Россия и Германия: оценка нынешних отношений и перспективы их развития*, 2013).

4.5. Transparency of action

Russel Hardin (2009, p. 26) notes that trust means to have enough and adequate information about the subject of our potential trust. The authenticity of information is crucial because having wrong information we may trust the wrong person (Hardin, 2009, p. 26). In case of state, it may be even more dangerous.

Poland and Russia have signed a lot of agreements and developed many channels of communication. On the one hand, we make declarations of partnership, and on the other we organize or take part in activities like military maneuvers which are directed against the alleged partner e.g. Russian-Belarusian Military Exercise *Zapad (West)* or *Steadfast Jazz* (2013)⁴.

After aggression against Ukraine in 2014, our relations got worse. Both sides use propaganda and disinformation tools. Poland and Russia as well keep demonizing one another, using not necessarily real images and symbols from history to build a negative portrait of the other side. The “information warfare”, propaganda and disinformation have no positive effect on confidence building. On the other hand, aggression against the brotherly Ukrainian nation with violation of international law makes it even more difficult to build confidence. It does not mean that Poland has always acted according to international law. Enough to mention the intervention in Kosovo (1999) and in Iraq (2003) – in both cases without permission by the UN Security Council.

5. Conclusions

There is a lot of accumulated distrust in the Polish-Russian relations. In the current circumstances, connected with the Ukrainian crisis it is really hard to outline a positive perspective of trust not only between Poland and Russia, but also between Russia and the West. Notwithstanding, we may try to ask the question: How can we build trust between states? And how can we build trust between the two states – Poland and Russia?

Firstly, there is a need to judge rationally the activities and the foreign policy of the other side, concentrating more on interests and less on intentions and values. It is crucial and very helpful to use the language of interests especially

⁴ These maneuvers were organized before Russian aggression against Ukraine.

regarding the contentious issues. Using arguments of interests makes it easier to find points of convergence.

Secondly, both sides should rationally assess their own capabilities and opportunities, and especially not overestimate them.

Thirdly, practical application of “contact hypothesis” is helpful to build trust. The “contact hypothesis” claims that the contact between members of feuding groups leads to reduction of prejudice and to improvement of the overall relationship (Brown & Hewstone, 2005, pp. 255–343). To obtain beneficial effects, both sides should:

- engage equally in the relationship;
- have common goals and work on them;
- have support of authorities (Forsyth, 2009).

Fourthly, according to sociological conceptions, states and their societies should try to apply a step by step method in building trust. If we have no trust to the construction of the bridge (the sociological and psychological metaphor of trust) or to its constructors, we are very cautious and walk over the bridge very carefully. The same is with relations between states with low level of trust. Their decision-makers and societies should try to find some common goals and try to achieve them. It will be extremely hard in relations between Poland and Russia especially today.

Concluding, currently the level of trust in the Polish-Russian relations is in the red. Trust is fragile (Danchev & Ross, 2014, p. 63). It is very easy to lose it and very hard to regain it (See: Bok, 1978, p. 26; Hardin, 1998, p. 21). During our common history, there has been almost no trust between Poland and Russia. The truth is that we have nothing to regain which might be a positive. It may e.g. compel both nation to focus more on the future than on the troubled past. It might have a good influence not only on the Polish-Russian relations. In case of Poland and Russia, trust can only be built, but probably it is going to be a long and a hard way.

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