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The Polish-Russian ‘monument war’ in the context of the Law and Justice’s historical policy

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Abstract: *The article addresses the issue of the influence of historical conditions on Polish-Russian relations on the threshold of the 21st century. After the collapse of the communist system in Poland in 1989, the new political elites, guiding the process of democratic transition in the Third Republic of Poland, made efforts to settle the disputed threads of common Polish-Russian history. One of the sources of conflict in terms of the historical burdens was case the removal by Poland of monuments to Red Army soldiers who died on Polish soil. This problem has become an important antagonistic element in bilateral relations, leading to the outbreak of a Polish-Russian ‘monument war’. To a large extent, the disputes over Soviet monuments dominated discussions in the Polish-Russian relations, creating another field of conflict on the historical level.*

Key words: History, historical policy, Poland, Russia, bilateral relations, Law and Justice, historical liabilities, national stereotypes, World War II

Introduction

Contemporary relations between Poland and Russia are shaped by a great deal of historical experience. Due to their geographical proximity, these countries have been continuously and to a different extent influenced by their past. A past that was marked above all by a history of conflict taking place not only in the territorial but also economical, cultural and social dimensions. These bad experiences of mutual relations have contributed to various historical burdens and national stereotypes strongly affecting the way the two nations perceive each other. The gravity of history, manifested in the issue of the perception and misperception of individual events and processes from common Polish-Russian history (e.g. the Polish intervention in the Kremlin at the beginning of the 17th century, Russia’s participation in the partitions of Poland, the suppression of Polish national uprisings by Tsarism, the Polish-Bolshevik war of 1920, contradictions relating to the World War II or the assessment

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of Soviet domination in the years of the Polish People's Republic), has resulted in the emergence of many unexplained disputes, different myths and past problems negatively affecting the entirety of mutual relations.

The fall of communism in Poland created favourable conditions for fundamental changes in all areas of the state's functioning. This also applied to foreign policy, which for the first time in nearly fifty years could be freely created by the new authorities of the Third Republic of Poland. Growing up on the tradition of independence and solidarity, the political elites had to face the necessity to break with the legacy of the past era and build the international position of the country in the process of democratization based on *raison d'état* and social consensus. The key problem that arose in this place was the issue of developing the vision of Polish activity in the East, and thus relations with the Russian state. Importantly, the need to develop a new formula of cooperation was also followed by the issue raised by Warsaw to clarify the blank spots in the common history of these two nations. For the Polish side, the issue of settling the wrongs that were inflicted on the Polish state by the Soviet Union during World War II came to the fore here.¹

The historical issues have become an area that has led to the numerous conflicts and disputes in the mutual relations since the early 1990s. This was due to the fact that the historical memory of these two nations turned out to differentiate in many cases, which deepened the differences in the assessment of certain events and processes from the common past – especially in relation to the 20th century. Complicated historical experiences put a negative influence on the state and nature of mutual relations, making it difficult to reach a common understanding.² The situation in this matter deteriorated significantly at the beginning of the next century. This was due, on the one hand, to the initiation by Vladimir Putin of a new Russian historical policy aimed at diminishing the responsibility of that state for various kinds of disgraceful actions of the USSR.³ On the other hand, despite the many gestures of goodwill made by the Moscow authorities towards Warsaw, the Polish side continued to argue that there are still many unresolved problems in this field.⁴

The climate of the already uneasy relations deteriorated significantly after Law and Justice took power, following the victorious parliamentary elections to the Sejm in October 2015, a group perceived by Moscow's leaders as a 'Russophobic' formation with anti-Russian grudges, intended to create an image of Russia as a country alien to civilization and hostile to Poland. One of the main challenges that stood at that time on the way to arranging mutual relations in historical matters, apart from existing disputes regarding the interpretation of certain facts and events relating to the history of World

¹ Underwood, 2015.

² Słowiński, 2021a: 240.

³ Sweet, 2016: 4514.

⁴ Słowiński, 2021b: 338.

War II⁵ as well as the approach of both sides to the subject of the Katyn massacre,⁶ became the issue of monuments commemorating the Red Army soldiers who died in these lands in 1944-1945, which led to the outbreak of a kind of ‘monument war’.⁷ When analyzing this issue, it became extremely important to indicate whether and to what extent the actions taken by Poland in the matter of Soviet monuments were in line with the historical policy of Law and Justice. Secondly, an equally important aim of the research was to show the impact of this conflict on bilateral relations and what possible consequences it might have had.

The main assumptions of the Law and Justice’s historical policy

From the very beginning of its creation in 2001, the members of the Law and Justice Party, pointed out the importance of the historical memory within their activities. The leaders of this party openly spoke about the need to

“strengthen the independent existence of the Republic of Poland and the international position of our country”,⁸

as well as the need for the state to promote patriotic attitudes among citizens and to shape an affirmative attitude towards an independent and democratic state. Because it was in patriotism and caring for national memory that the party members saw the way to create national cohesion and improve the quality of life of the society and the development of the entire country. Therefore, from the very beginning, representatives of this party emphasized the unique role of the nation understood as a community of history and culture, and such an example of it was to prove how much importance Law and Justice would attach in its policy to the idea of memory, the past and national identity.⁹ As the activists of this formation pointed out,

“our life must be unambiguously embedded within the tradition of the First Polish Republic, in the struggle for independence during the partitions, in the fight against the German and Soviet occupiers during World War II, as well as in the tradition of fighting against communist rule in Poland”.¹⁰

The latter aspect – settling accounts with the communist times

⁵ See Ozbay & Aras, 2008; Sherlock, 2011; Stolarczyk, 2016; Radziwon, 2018; Bækken & Enstad, 2020.

⁶ See Paul, 2010; Langford, 2012; Fredheim, 2014; Urban, 2020; Słowiński, 2021c.

⁷ Sprawozdanie stenograficzne, 2016: 75.

⁸ Statut PiS, 2001: 4.

⁹ Program PiS, 2014: 157.

¹⁰ Kongres założycielski, 2001: 87.

“[...] denying successive elements of modern history, telling the truth about the times of the People’s Republic of Poland, martial law”¹¹

has become one of the main goals of the historical policy of Law and Justice. Settling accounts with the times of People’s Poland was to take place, among others, in through the final cleansing of public space from the relics of the communist past. For the members of this party, it was unacceptable that some streets or institutions were still patronized by symbols that were identified with the communist system.¹² For this reason, they believed that the Polish state should as soon as possible get rid of the remnants associated with the former regime that still remain within the public space, which included, among others, also monuments erected in our country in honor of the Soviet army. However, this issue quickly became the subject of a sharp conflict on the Warsaw-Moscow line, inflaming even more mutual disputes in the historical field.¹³

The issue of Soviet monuments

The tension on historical issues that arose in mutual relations between 2015 and 2019 concerned several fundamental issues. One of them was case the removal by Poland of monuments to Red Army soldiers who died on Polish soil. The origins of this conflict date back to the early 1990s; at that time, following the overthrow of the communist system in Poland, the new local authorities began the mass removal from public space of all symbols (including Soviet monuments) that embodied or promoted the former regime as part of the decommunisation process initiated after 1989. The Kremlin was strongly opposed to the implementation of these measures, primarily with regard to Soviet monuments, already at that point. The early 21st century saw a sharp increase in disputes in this area due to V. Putin’s policy of rebuilding the international position of the Russian Federation and creating a new national identity for Russians. As part of these processes, Moscow increasingly sought to challenge the post-Cold War order, including in the dimension of interpreting history, through such methods as rejecting attempts to undermine the image of the Red Army’s 1944-1945 offensive as liberatory in nature, as well as defending the Soviet interpretation of the past. Soviet monuments played a crucial role in the creation of such a narrative and were intended to remind all of Central and Eastern Europe of the liberating mission of the Soviet Union’s army, its defeat of Hitlerism, sacrifice and the blood it shed for the ‘freedom’ of other nations.¹⁴

¹¹ Spotkanie z historią bez fałszu, 2005.

¹² Deklaracja polityczna, 2001: 17.

¹³ Pełny zapis przebiegu posiedzenia, 2013: 6.

¹⁴ Różycki, 2016.

The issue of Soviet monuments was an important aspect that antagonised the bilateral relations from the very onset of the Law and Justice government's term, leading to the outbreak of a Polish-Russian 'monument war'. The first tensions in this field during the Law and Justice party's period in power arose as early as the end of November 2015 due to the dismantling of a 1963 obelisk to the Red Army in the town of Mielec. This act provoked a critical response from the Kremlin, just like every other of its kind had. The Russian side believed that any actions taken by Poland in this regard violated the 1992 and 1994 Polish-Russian agreements regulating the issues of mutual protection of graves and memorial sites.¹⁵ Warsaw disagreed with this claim and took the view that the international obligations ratified in this area referred only to cemeteries and burial sites of Soviet soldiers. In its opinion, they do not cover the so-called 'monuments of gratitude' (erected to mark Communist rule over Poland), erected in places where no one was buried. Moreover, as noted by the authorities of the Third Polish Republic, all matters related to Soviet monuments remained the responsibility of local authorities who could dismantle them if they wished, as per the existing regulations.¹⁶

Other municipalities and cities in Poland have also expressed their intention to remove Communist monuments that are still present in the public space, each time provoking a strong reaction from Moscow.¹⁷ In response to these actions, the Russian State Duma issued a special statement on 18 December 2015, manifesting its deep indignation over the destruction of memorials and burial sites of Soviet soldiers in Poland. Russian MEPs also expressed their dissatisfaction at the "belittling of the contribution of the Soviet people to defeating the Third Reich", as well as the "distortion of the Red Army's role in the liberation of Poland".¹⁸ At the same time, the lower house of the Russian parliament issued an announcement in which it appealed to the Polish Sejm to put an end to the 'war on monuments' and memorial sites, which, in its view, should be under reliable state protection. However, the then authorities of the Third Polish Republic had no intention to succumb to pressure from the Kremlin. Representatives of the Polish government continued to emphasise that Poland was properly complying with all bilateral agreements in this regard and taking due care of the burial sites of Soviet soldiers, while also stressing that these agreements only applied to graves and not symbolic monuments, which the Polish state had the right to dismantle if it so chose.

¹⁵ Komentarz MID, 2015.

¹⁶ Gorczyca, 2015.

¹⁷ Among the local authorities who pointed to such a necessity were those of Sanok – in December 2015, they expressed their desire to remove the 'Red Army Liberator' monument located in their city; Pomnik wdzięczności, 2015.

¹⁸ zasedaniye Gosdumy (18.12.2015).

It is fair to say that the difference of opinion that existed between Poland and Russia in this field was due to a radically different interpretation of 20th-century events and processes. For the Polish side, the Soviet monuments were a symbol of subordination to the Communist system, which was brought in by the Red Army and brutally imposed by the Polish Communists. A system which – as noted by the Third Polish Republic authorities – brought further enslavement to Poland, claiming thousands of victims in the process, and which had previously collaborated with the Third Reich, initiated aggression against Poland on 17 September 1939, deported residents of Poland's Eastern Borderland to remote regions of the USSR and carried out the Katyń massacre. For the Kremlin leadership, the cult of memory associated with the events of World War II (of which Soviet monuments are an important carrier) has played an important part in building national identity. In Putin's contemporary historical policy, the myth of the 'Great Patriotic War' – the glue that holds together this Russian idea of community – has left no room for the tragedies brought about by the Soviet Union. The building by Russia of an image of the USSR's gallantry and heroism was thus accompanied by omitting, minimising or even falsifying the worst moments of its history. Any action that could undermine or violate this image is perceived by Moscow as an attack on Russian national identity.¹⁹

It must be stressed that the grandiose mythos of the 'Great Patriotic War' and the victorious Red Army holds a special place in current Russian politics because it also makes it possible to interpret these events in transnational terms. The Kremlin authorities can use them to influence neighbouring countries. Soviet monuments were significant carriers of this historical memory and served as an important tool for the reintegration of the post-Soviet space in V. Putin's strategy.²⁰ For this reason, the main objective of Moscow's contemporary historical concept has become to emphasize the myth of the heroic Red Army, portrayed as the liberator of Central and Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation, which brought political freedom and independence to the region. Moscow thus believes that CEE countries should be grateful to today's Russia (as the USSR's inheritor) and the monuments to Soviet soldiers erected after World War II, as well as their burial places, should be subject to special protection and remain where they are – even if the societies of these nations consider them symbols of Soviet subordination and enslavement. V. Putin deems any steps taken by the former Eastern Bloc countries to remove Soviet monuments as an attempt to challenge this idealised Russian narrative about the liberating role of the Red Army. Therefore, the Kremlin strongly opposes any such actions and goes as far as to impose

¹⁹ Materski, 2017: 34.

²⁰ Olędzka, 2016: 140.

sanctions as a punishment for them – something that proved painful for Estonia²¹ in 2007 and what was Poland afraid of.

The dispute over the Soviet memorials escalated even further following an announcement made by the President of the Institute of National Remembrance Ł. Kamiński in late March 2016. He stated that a special project assuming the removal of nearly 500 monuments of ‘gratitude to the Soviet army’ that remained in public space and symbolised communist enslavement and subordination to the Soviet Union would be addressed to the Polish local government officials.²² Moscow reacted strongly to these plans. Just a few days later, the Russian Civic Chamber (an advisory and consultative institution established in 2005 as the third organ of the constitutional order of the Russian Federation, whose duties included giving opinions on laws) submitted a notification to the OSCE and UNESCO on the “need to protect Soviet monuments in Poland”.²³ According to E. Sutormina, the head of the (organisation’s) committee on public diplomacy, the INR initiative was “a clear violation of international norms”.²⁴ S. Lavrov spoke in equally strong terms, announcing that Poland “has come out on top among countries fighting against monuments to Soviet soldiers killed during World War II”.²⁵

The Act on the prohibition of propagation of communism or any other totalitarian system, which had been prepared back in 2007 by the Law and Justice party and was finally passed by the Polish Parliament on 1 April 2016,²⁶ was of further concern to the Kremlin. According to the Act, the names of buildings, structures and public utilities, including roads, streets, bridges and squares, could not commemorate persons, organisations, events or dates hearkening back to Poland’s old communist system. This marked the first time the Polish state decided to comprehensively standardise the issue of decommunisation of public space, and at the same time, to complete this process as soon as possible. Based on these regulations, all relics of the Communist era, including monuments to the Red Army (the so-called monuments of gratitude, monuments of brotherhood and monuments to Soviet partisans) were supposed to disappear from social life once and for all. Several months later, on 22 June 2017, the Parliament of the Third Polish Republic amended the above Act by specifying the principles of creating legal mechanisms for the removal of monuments subject to Polish-Russian disputes, among other things.²⁷ These steps provoked a violent reaction from Russia, which called them an ‘outrageous and

²¹ Following the removal of a 'liberator' monument commemorating the Red Army from the centre of Tallinn in 2007, the Russian Federation cut off oil supplies to Estonia; Kattago, 2009: 160-166.

²² Foks, 2017/2018: 78.

²³ OP RF, 2016.

²⁴ OP RF, 2016.

²⁵ Ławrow mówił o Polsce, 2016.

²⁶ Dz.U. 2016 poz. 744.

²⁷ Dz.U. 2017 poz. 1389; Cembrzyńska, 2020: 132.

scandalous provocation' and announced that any action by Warsaw to remove Soviet monuments would be met with an adequate response from Moscow.²⁸

All the legal steps taken in this regard to finally solve the problem of Soviet monuments were the result of a broader approach taken by representatives of the Law and Justice party, who attached great importance to the issue of memory, the past and national identity. For them, these issues were among the key elements in maintaining the national cohesion of Polish society, as well as bringing it in line with modern civilisation standards and improving its quality of life. The Law and Justice leaders thus declared that matters of historical memory would be a crucial factor in their policy, which implied intense activity of the Polish state in this sphere. They stressed that

“[t]he State cannot merely perform economic functions and act as a limited liability company. In light of the weakness of contemporary authority figures [...], it is worth appealing to a broader perspective, which allows one to see more and better and makes it possible to see sense where current disputes blur it”.²⁹

One of the important aspects of this policy of remembrance led by the Law and Justice party was the matter of the historical settlement of the Polish People's Republic era, “to show what the essence of communism and the Polish People's Republic consisted of”.³⁰ The issue of the Soviet monuments remaining in Poland – symbols of enslavement and subjugation of Poland to the Soviet Union and remnants of the former system, which according to some Law and Justice members should immediately disappear from public space – played a major role in this process of coming to terms with a bygone era.

Conclusions

Relations between Poland and Russia are among those research problems that can be seen as complicated. There are many reasons for this state of affairs. One of them is the issue of historical memory and the burdens associated with it. From the very beginning, the history strongly influenced the state and nature of the contemporary relations between the two nations. This case was no different during the rule of the Law and Justice Party in Poland during the period between 2015 and 2019. From the very beginning of the party's rule, the historical issues generated – as in previous years – numerous conflicts and disputes in Polish-Russian relations. The sources of tension that arose in this field concerned several fundamental problems.

²⁸ Radziwinowicz, 2017.

²⁹ See Tokarz, 2012: 27.

³⁰ Program PiS, 2005: 17.

The issue of the monuments commemorating the soldiers of the Red Army who died in these lands was removed in the foreground here.

The reasons for the antagonisms that arose in this place should be sought in the extremely different interpretations of the events and historical processes concerning World War II by both nations. This process was particularly intensified during the rule of Vladimir Putin, who initiated a ‘new Russian historical policy’ aiming at sacralising the history of the Soviet state, especially as regards the period of World War II. The central and dominant place was occupied by the martyrdom of the ‘Great Patriotic War’, which was to create the image of this conflict only as a heroic, glorious act, showing the power of the USSR. These actions were accompanied by the promotion of the myth of the greatness of the Red Army (and thus the USSR), which aim was to liberate the countries of Central and Eastern Europe from Nazi occupation and, as the main force, contribute to the victory over the Third Reich. Any actions – including the removal of Soviet monuments in Poland – that could question or undermine this created image were treated as an attack on the Russian national consciousness. All this led to intensifying ‘memory wars’ between the Kremlin and countries that challenge the Russian interpretation of those events, including Poland.

For Law and Justice party, the Soviet monuments were a symbol of subordination to the communist system brought by the Red Army and brutally led by the Polish communists. Meanwhile, historical settlement of the past system has become one of the main priorities of this party, “showing what the essence of communism and the Polish People’s Republic consisted in”.³¹ The implementation of these goals was to be supported by the steps taken in the field of decommunization, aimed, among others, at to the final removal of the symbols promoting the past system still in the public space – including Soviet monuments. Actions taken in this regard provoked violent opposition from the Kremlin leaders, which further intensified the state of distrust and reluctance between the two sides and prevented the development of any consensus that would lead to a solution to the existing problems. Disputes over Soviet monuments to a large extent dominated the discussions over Polish-Russian relations, creating another field of conflict on the historical level.

³¹ Program PiS, 2001: 24.

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