

Polish Public Opinion Toward Russia in the Aftermath of Smolensk

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR IMPROVED RELATIONS

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 111

Joshua Tucker
New York University

Polish-Russian relations have long been among the thorniest in Europe, providing an often serious impediment to improving broader EU-Russian relations. The events of April 2010, beginning with Russia's changing line on the Katyn Forest massacre and culminating in the response of both countries to the Smolensk plane crash tragedy, were widely reported as presenting an opportunity for a reset in Polish-Russian relations. Nevertheless, animosity toward Russia among Polish citizens has long been presumed to run deep; should we expect a single set of events to change this?

This memo explores Polish public opinion regarding Polish-Russian relations in the aftermath of the Smolensk tragedy. The following observations are made:

1. Despite conventional wisdom, the Polish population has been amenable to better relations with Russia.
2. Prior to the Smolensk tragedy, most Polish citizens had been pessimistic about the state of Polish-Russian relations.
3. Despite some aggressive rhetoric about conspiracy theories from the fringe of Polish politics, a large majority of Polish citizens approved of the way Russia handled the tragedy.
4. In the aftermath of the tragedy, optimism about Polish-Russian relations among the Polish citizenry increased substantially.

While short-term swings in public opinion always need to be taken with a grain of salt, all these factors taken together lead to the conclusion that the Polish public would indeed be supportive of steps to improve relations with Russia. This, in turn, gives added credence to efforts on the part of Polish elites to improve those relations, as we have reason to think that, at worst, any animosity that existed toward improving Polish-Russian relations among the Polish citizenry has diminished; at best, the citizenry may turn out to be supportive of such developments.

Background

Polish-Russian relations have long been complicated by a history that has seen Russia repeatedly take part in the dismemberment of Poland, including the “Polish partitions” of the 18th and 19th centuries and then again with the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Fast forwarding to the post-communist era, Russia’s relations with Poland in recent years have been poor, probably ranking among the worst of its relations with former Warsaw Pact allies, as well as perhaps its most contentious with a member state of the European Union. Tensions have repeatedly flared between the two states, including over Poland’s decision to join the EU and NATO, Russia’s two year ban on importing meat from Poland, Poland’s role in blocking Russia’s World Trade Organization (WTO) aspirations, Russia’s plans to build a gas pipeline with Germany bypassing Poland, and, perhaps most seriously, Poland’s role in the United States’ missile defense program.

Against this background, it may seem a bit surprising that Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who is generally known for his nationalist approach to foreign policy, decided to take part in a joint ceremony with Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to honor the Poles killed in the Katyn Forest massacre on the 70th anniversary of that event. The very fact of this joint ceremony prompted *Der Spiegel* to suggest that the “gesture heralds [a] new era in Russian-Polish relations.”¹ Several days later, Polish-Russian relations would be thrust into an entirely new dimension due to what has become known as the Smolensk tragedy, when the plane carrying Polish President Lech Kaczyński, his wife, and many other high-ranking members of the Polish government crashed on its way to a separate ceremony honoring the Katyn victims. While such an event held the potential for further damaging Russian-Polish relations, the way in which both the Russian people and Russian leadership reacted suggested the opposite might be the case: the tragedy could present an opportunity for a real thaw in Russian-Polish relations. Today, almost five months after the crash, the rhetoric of this thaw can still be heard in discussions about the future of Polish-Russian relations. This is all the more impressive given the fact that there have been numerous opportunities for improved Polish-Russian relations to get derailed, including, most recently, the arrest and release in Poland of Akhmed Zakayev, a Chechen leader in exile, as well as the signing in July of a revised agreement for placing U.S. missile interceptors in Poland.

To what extent to is the rhetoric of rapprochement at the elite level matched by Polish public opinion? While elites do not necessarily need the support of the masses to change foreign policy direction, we would certainly expect such changes to be more difficult to both implement and sustain if such support were lacking. Fortunately for the sake of Polish-Russian relations, initial assessments of Polish public opinion are positive.

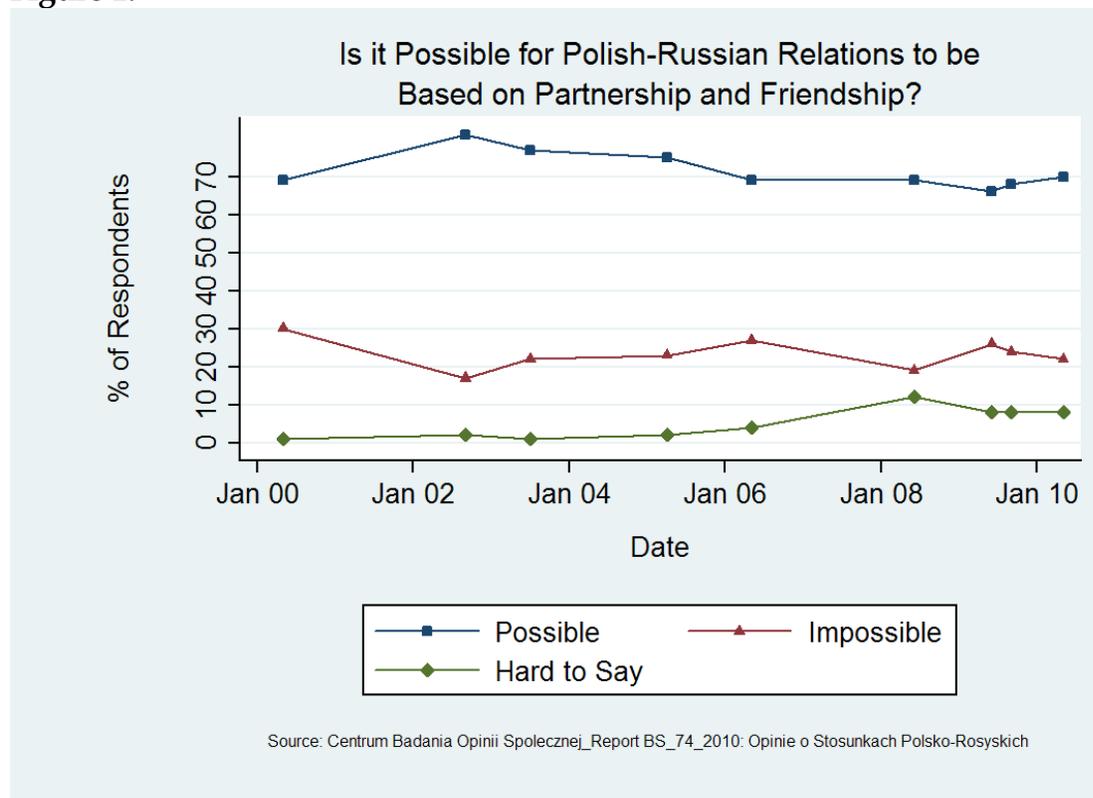
¹ <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/0,1518,687819,00.html>

Polish Attitudes toward Polish-Russian Relations

The first important fact to realize about public opinion in Poland is that, at least for the past 10 years, the Polish public has *not* had a fatalistic approach to Polish-Russian relations.

Indeed, as Figure 1 below demonstrates, a strong majority of Poles believe that positive relations between Poland and Russia – defined here as “relations based on partnership and friendship” – are possible, with only about a quarter of the population thinking such relations are impossible. This data represents a time-series of the same survey question asked by the Center for Public Opinion Research (CBOS).² It is worth noting that there is practically no difference in the nature of the responses after the Smolensk tragedy (the final data point on the far right of the figure) as compared to those from earlier in the decade. Thus, in this case, there is no reason to assume that this final set of responses – from a survey between May 8-13, 2010 – is in any way a short-term response to Smolensk. Therefore, the conclusion that Poles are at least amenable to positive relations between Poland and Russia seems credible.

Figure 1.



In contrast, however, attitudes toward the current state of Russian-Polish relations do appear to have changed rather substantially in the aftermath of the

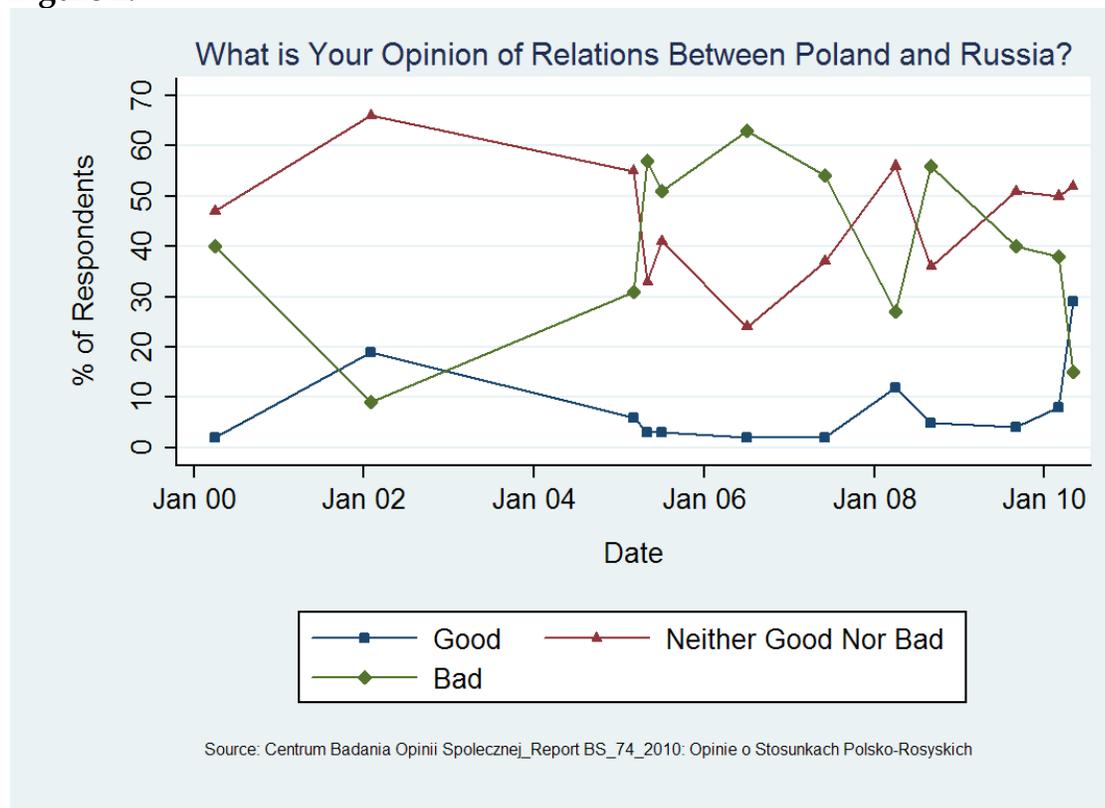
² http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2010/K_067_10.PDF

Smolensk tragedy (see Figure 2 below). While this time-series is a bit more unstable than the first one, three points are worth noting.

First, prior to the May 2010 survey, no more than 20 percent of Poles ever saw Polish-Russian relations in a positive light; in most instances, in fact, fewer than 10 percent (or even 5 percent!) had a positive opinion of the relationship.

Second, most of the instability in the time-series is due to variation in the proportion of Poles who thought Polish-Russian relations were “bad” as opposed to those who thought they were “neither good nor bad.” In the earlier and latter part of the decade, pluralities of the population thought relations were “neither good nor bad.” From 2005-2008, pluralities generally thought relations were “bad” (roughly coinciding with the period of the PiS [Party of Law and Order] led government in Poland).

Figure 2.



Finally, and perhaps most importantly, in Figure 2 above, the shift following the Smolensk tragedy really does appear to be a significant one, with the proportion of respondents thinking that relations were “good” rising substantially and the proportion thinking that relations were “bad” falling substantially; the proportion thinking relations were “neither good nor bad” stayed fairly constant. (Note that we cannot conclusively say that large numbers of individuals switched from thinking relations were “bad” to “good”; this data could have been generated by those who thought relations were “bad” switching to “neither good nor bad” and those who thought they

were “neither good nor bad” switching to “good.” However, the aggregate effect is the same.) Indeed, the May 2010 survey was only the second since the year 2000 when more Poles thought relations with Russia were “good” than thought they were “bad.” That poll also featured the highest proportion of Poles – almost a third of the country – who believed that relations were “good.”

Two important caveats are in order. First, we only have one real observation in this time-series of Polish public opinion post-Smolensk, so it is too early to say whether the changes recorded in May 2010 are likely to be temporary or of a more permanent nature. Second, the question in the survey that asked respondents for their opinion of Polish-Russian relations was not ideal for our purposes. A question asking whether respondents were personally supportive of improved relations would have been better.

That being said, there are reasons for thinking that the survey’s results tapped into an important public sentiment regarding Polish-Russian relations. First, we have no reason to think that the May 2010 survey results were simply an outlier. According to CBOS:

- Forty-eight percent of Poles believed that the plane catastrophe would “improve” Polish-Russian relations (as opposed to only 5 percent who felt it would make relations worse).
- Seventy-seven percent felt that the reaction of Russian authorities “met or exceeded” their expectations.
- Eighty-five percent felt that the reaction of the Russian people “met or exceeded” their expectations.
- Sixty-seven percent thought that the actions of the Russian government toward the families of the victims were “rather good” or “definitely good.”
- Fifty percent thought the actions of the Russian government to explain the causes of the crash were “good” or “rather good.”

Knowing what we know about people’s tendencies to project their own prejudices into evaluations of other people’s behavior, these are not the kind of numbers we would expect to see from a population that was inherently hostile toward Russia. Indeed, to the extent that the Polish public is inherently hostile toward Russia, these numbers are highly credible in explaining *why* public opinion toward Polish-Russian relations would have improved so dramatically in the May 2010 survey: Poles clearly felt positive about the way that Russia, both its elites and its public at large, reacted to the Smolensk tragedy.

While it is again worth noting that we cannot yet comment on the duration of these effects, the data from Figure 1 – that indicate that Poles have long believed that good Polish-Russian relations are possible – hold open the possibility that the effects will prove to be more than temporary. To see the logic of this argument, consider the counterfactual: if 70 percent of the population had long held that positive Polish-Russian relations were impossible, we would suspect that the improved view of Polish-Russian relations after Smolensk might be temporary. The fact that 70 percent of the

population for at least the last decade has accepted the possibility of better relations with Russia ought to give us reason to suspect that the effect may be longer lasting.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the most proximate determinant of Polish-Russian relations will always be the actions of Polish and Russian elites. To this extent, there are also reasons to suspect that the recent détente in Polish-Russian relations will continue. This is highlighted most notably by the defeat of Jarosław Kaczyński in the 2010 Polish presidential election by Bronisław Komorowski and the ongoing “reset” of U.S.-Russian relations. However, at the end of the day, long-term transformations of foreign policy – especially between countries with a history of mutual antagonism – are going to require acceptance on the part of the population. From this vantage point, the initial hopes that the silver lining of the Smolensk tragedy could be improved Polish-Russian relations look justified, at least in the short run. Time will tell if more long-term optimism is warranted, but for now we can safely conclude that there is nothing yet in public opinion data to suggest we ought to temper such expectations.

This publication was made possible by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York. The statements made and views expressed are solely the responsibility of the author.

© PONARS Eurasia 2010