

## Security Perceptions and the Armed Forces in Poland

*Anna Maria Dyner*

Russia's aggression in Ukraine (the annexation of Crimea and involvement in the war in Donbas) that started in 2014, has changed security perceptions in Central and Eastern Europe. For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the stability of the region is in danger and that has changed the threat perceptions in Poland.

For the member states of NATO and the European Union, the war in Ukraine became a starting point for a serious discussion about security in the Euro-Atlantic world. Russia started to be perceived not only as a challenge to both organisations but as a serious threat. Among the most visible results of this policy shift were the provisions of the NATO Summit at Newport, Wales, in 2014. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Poland together with Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Romania called for the significant strengthening of NATO's deterrence and defence policy and for the permanent deployments of Allied troops in the region.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine prompted a strong reaction from Poland, which requested an emergency meeting of the North Atlantic Council that took place on 4 March 2014.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in response to Russia's actions, which undermined the post-Cold War order in Europe, the NATO leaders in Newport decided to strengthen security on the Alliance's Eastern Flank. Decisions were taken not only to reassure NATO members but also to discourage Russia from escalating tensions, and to demonstrate NATO support for Ukraine.<sup>2</sup>

The second factor that significantly affected the security discussion in Poland was the government change in 2015. The new government, under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), made changes to the Polish armed forces and other uniformed services. In 2016, under the Act on the National Tax Administration, the Customs Service (SC) became a uniformed service. In 2017, the State Security Service (SOP) was created, a uniformed formation under the Ministry of Interior and Administration, which in February 2018 replaced the Governmental Protection Bureau (BOR).

<sup>1</sup> For more, see: A. Kacprzyk, "Deterring Russia after Ukraine: CEE Divided on the Future of NATO Policy," *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 13 (96), 2014, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

<sup>2</sup> For more, see: W. Lorenz, "NATO Narrows Military Gap on Its Eastern Flank," *PISM Strategic File*, No. 20 (55), [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).

In September 2018, the Polish minister of National Defence decided to create a new mechanised division (Poland's fourth), which will be based in Siedlce, eastern Poland. Moreover, in 2017, just before NATO Summit in Warsaw, the Polish Ministry of National Defence published *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, which was one of the results of the strategic defence review. It presented a new vision for the Polish armed forces and underlined that Russia is the biggest threat to Polish security. It also mentioned the need to modernise the military and the establishment of a new formation – the Territorial Defence Force (WOT). The document was also presented as a starting point for a bigger discussion about Polish security and a comprehensive review of Polish strategic documents.

Poland's membership in NATO and the European Union reinforces its security. NATO is perceived as the most important political and military guarantor of Poland's security, while the EU supports Poland's socio-economic development and strengthens its position in the world. At the same time, the United States remains Poland's most important non-European partner. Poland is engaged in five NATO missions and activities: in Afghanistan (330 troops), Iraq (60), Kosovo (250), Romania (Tailored Forward Presence, 220), and Latvia (Enhanced Forward Presence, 170).

### **National Security Documents**

The Polish law does not comprehensively regulate the functioning of the national security system. Besides the Constitution, three strategic documents are dedicated to security. The most important is the *National Security Strategy of the Republic of Poland* adopted in 2014. The others are the *Strategy of Development of the National Security System of the Republic of Poland 2022* from 2013 and the *Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland* that was published in May 2017 as part of the strategic defence review. Security regulations can be found in plenty of other bills devoted, e.g., to the Police or Border Guards. The Polish parliament is working on a bill for a national rescue system that will harmonise legal provisions on emergency services.

Besides the perception of a direct threat from Russia, the Polish strategy document mentioned economic crises, demand for energy and water resources, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international terrorism, and cyberthreats as the main dangers to world stability.

Since the *National Security Strategy* was adopted in 2014, it only partly includes the threats raised by Russia's aggression towards Ukraine. This document, together with the presidential and parliamentary campaign ongoing at that time in Poland, was the starting point for an internal Polish debate on security issues. However, everyone involved in it stressed that the main threat to Poland is Russia and wanted to strengthen the power of the Polish armed forces.

The new government in 2016 inaugurated the strategic defence review. The first result was the preparation of the *Defence Concept*, in which the then-Polish minister Antoni Macierewicz wrote that the "events of the past few years, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine, the destabilisation of the Middle East and North Africa, and successive terrorist attacks, show a growing number of threats to Poland".<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, <http://en.mon.gov.pl/documents/category/dokumenty/the-defence-concept-of-the-republic-of-poland-j-103276/>.

The *National Security Strategy* stated that “Russia’s relations with the West will remain an important factor influencing the security of Poland, the region and Europe. The reassertion of Russia’s position as a major power at the expense of its neighbourhood, as well as the escalation of its confrontational policy, an example of which is the conflict with Ukraine, including the annexation of Crimea, has a negative impact on the security in the region”.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the document stressed that “one of the most important instruments forming the security environment is the North Atlantic Alliance” and it is “pivotal to maintain a significant and lasting commitment of the United States in European security matters, within the framework of NATO and bilateral relations.”<sup>5</sup> However, at the same time it underlined that “the situation in the region of North Africa and the Middle East, as well as the persisting potential for instability in the Balkans is a serious challenge for the European security.”<sup>6</sup>

The *Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland* also points to Russia as the main threat to the security of the state:

“The Russian Federation aims at enhancing its position in the global balance of power by using various means. They include breaches of the international law, the regular use of force and coercion in relations with other states and various attempts to destabilise Western integration structures. It poses a threat mainly to Poland and other countries in the region but also for all other nations desirous of a stable international order. Russia openly declares NATO to be the main threat to its security, despite numerous actions by the Alliance emphasising its defensive character. It is especially worrying in the context of constantly rising military spending and the modernisation of the Russian Armed Forces. (...)

A source of special concern are the cases of committing the Russian Armed Forces to pursue political goals, such as the 2008 aggression against Georgia, the illegal annexation of Crimea, and the war in Eastern Ukraine. Russia is ready to destabilise the internal order of other states and to question their territorial integrity by openly violating the international law. Russia’s actions are often camouflaged and conducted below the threshold of an armed conflict. It is not unrealistic that Russia could incite a regional conflict and drag into it one or several NATO countries. Russia is also likely to provoke proxy wars in various parts of the world in order to exert pressure on Western countries.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, the Polish Ministry of National Defence assumed that “Russia will maintain its aggressive stance in its foreign and security policies. Taking into account the asymmetry of military capabilities between Russia and NATO’s Eastern flank members, such a situation creates a direct threat for Poland and the region.”<sup>8</sup> At the same time, however, the document stressed that Poland recognized serious challenges connected with the deep, multi-faceted crisis on NATO’s southern border.<sup>9</sup> To counter these threats, the Polish armed forces should be flexible and responsive to increasingly diversified threats, and the core of the armed forces should remain

---

<sup>4</sup> National Security Bureau, *National Security Strategy*, [www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/NSS\\_RP.pdf](http://www.bbn.gov.pl/ftp/dok/NSS_RP.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>7</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, <http://en.mon.gov.pl/documents/category/dokumenty/the-defence-concept-of-the-republic-of-poland-j-103276>.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

operational units. At the same time, the new government established the Territorial Defence Force as a new formation trained to neutralise hostile activities below the threshold of an unarmed conflict and play a support role for regular troops. The document also stressed that “NATO remains the world’s most powerful military alliance, and Poland will make every effort to ensure that it remains a guarantor of peace and prosperity in Europe. The North Atlantic Alliance, as well as the European Union, have contributed to producing unparalleled stability of the continent.”<sup>10</sup>

Other threats identified in the Polish strategy documents include terrorism, threats related to globalisation, illegal migration, economic crises, threats related to climate change and natural disasters, new technology (e.g., electronic warfare), and fledgling technologies that could be implemented for military purposes. It is also crucial to maintain energy security, which for Poland means the diversification of energy sources.

Moreover, according to the Polish documents, the state security protection of critical infrastructure is crucial. In the *Strategy of Development of the National Security System of the Republic of Poland 2022* it is stressed that “the 2008/114/WE Directive of 8 December 2008 on the identification and designation of European critical infrastructure and the assessment of the need to improve their protection define the European Critical Infrastructure as infrastructure (the disruption of which) may affect at least two Member States”.<sup>11</sup>

### **Public Opinion Surveys**

Russia’s aggression towards Ukraine has increased the sense of threat among the Poles. According to surveys carried out by the Center for Public Opinion Research (COBOS) in April 2014, just after Crimea’s annexation by Russia, the sense of threat among Poles had grown to the highest level since 1991. Almost half of the respondents (47%) believed that at that time Poland’s independence was threatened. The influence of the events in Ukraine was also visible in a four-fold increase in the number of the respondents convinced that this threat is of a military nature and associated with the possibility of an attack on the territory of Poland by another country (an increase from 7% in December 2013 to 29% in April 2014). Moreover, 80% of the respondents said that Poland should be wary of Russia<sup>12</sup>.

In April 2014, as the main threats, Poles mentioned economic, understood as the dependence of Poland on other countries and financial institutions (45%); military, connected with the possibility that Poland could be attacked by some other state (29%); and, political, tied to a sense of the Polish government’s lack of the possibility to take decisions freely (18%).<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, *The Strategy of Development of the National Security System of the Republic of Poland 2022*, en-m.mon.gov.pl/p/.../ENGLISH\_SRSBN\_RP\_do\_pobrania.pdf.

<sup>12</sup> For more, see: Centrum Badań Opinii Społecznej, *Komunikat z badań COBOS nr 48/2014*, [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K\\_048\\_14.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_048_14.PDF).

<sup>13</sup> Ibidem.

Moreover in 2014, 61% of Poles thought that the situation in Ukraine threatened Poland's security while 54% considered it a danger for Europe. Moreover, 62% of Poles thought Russia might want to regain control over Central Europe.<sup>14</sup>

In March 2016, about 52% of Poles perceived the situation in Ukraine as dangerous for Poland (in comparison with 67% in June 2016).<sup>15</sup> In 2018, 44% of Poles considered Russia as a threat. At the same time, about 64% said that the Polish Army would not be able to protect the country from a Russian attack.<sup>16</sup>

Poles strongly believe in NATO. In 2014, the level of support for membership rose to a record 81%, and 64% of Poles supported strengthening NATO's presence in Poland. In 2018, the situation was not different, with 79% of the respondents supporting membership in NATO (only 3% were against), and 61% responding that NATO will be able to protect the Polish borders. Moreover, in 2018, 67% of the respondents supported the NATO enhanced forward presence of troops in Poland (in comparison with 57% in 2014).<sup>17</sup>

According to the polls conducted by Pew Research Center in 2017<sup>18</sup>, the main threats Poles perceive are Russia's power and influence, Islamic terrorism (mainly ISIS), the large number of refugees (irregular migration), cyber attacks from other countries, and global climate change, which is compatible with the threats indicated in the state's strategic documents.

### **Modernisation of the Armed Forces**

At the same time, a serious debate about the modernisation of the army is taking place. More than six months after PiS formed the new government, it cancelled talks with Airbus Helicopters on a PLN 13.5 billion (€3.14 billion) deal to buy multirole helicopters. This decision was seriously criticized by the Polish opposition and negatively influenced Polish-French relations.

The priority is the purchase of combat and multirole helicopters, patrol ships and medium- and long-range missile defence systems. The biggest challenge is not only the purchase of such weaponry systems but also obtaining the demanded offsets (involving the production of weapons parts and servicing in Poland). Decisions about such purchases are also dictated by the sense of a growing threat from Russia. In March 2018, Poland signed a contract for the supply of two Patriot missile batteries.

---

<sup>14</sup> For more, see: Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, *Komunikat z badań COBOS nr 59/2014*, [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K\\_059\\_14.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2014/K_059_14.PDF).

<sup>15</sup> For more, see: Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, *Komunikat z badań COBOS nr 33/2016*, [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K\\_033\\_16.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2016/K_033_16.PDF).

<sup>16</sup> Wirtualna Polska, "Sondaż WP: Polacy uważają Rosję za zagrożenie. I nie wierzą w polską armię," <https://opinie.wp.pl/sondaz-wp-polacy-uważaja-rosje-za-zagrozenie-i-nie-wierza-w-polska-armie-6275070205818497a>.

<sup>17</sup> For more, see: Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, *Komunikat z badań COBOS nr 71/2018*, [www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2018/K\\_071\\_18.PDF](http://www.cbos.pl/SPISKOM.POL/2018/K_071_18.PDF).

<sup>18</sup> For more, see: Pew Research Center, "Globally, People Point to ISIS and Climate Change as Leading Security Threats Concern about cyberattacks, world economy also widespread," [www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats](http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/08/01/globally-people-point-to-isis-and-climate-change-as-leading-security-threats).



According to the Polish Constitution, the Supreme Commander of the Polish Armed Forces is the president. During peacetime, the president exercises command over the Polish Armed Forces through the Minister of National Defence.<sup>19</sup> In peacetime, the Minister of National Defence directs all activities of the Polish Armed Forces and performs tasks with the assistance of the Ministry of National Defence, which includes the General Staff of the Polish Army. In war, the Armed Forces and other subordinated organisational units are commanded by the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, appointed by the president of the Republic of Poland and reporting directly to the president.

In 2014, the reform of the command structure of the Polish Armed Forces came into force. According to it, the Armed Forces General Command is responsible for commanding military units of the armed forces during peacetime; and under war conditions, military units should be commanded by the Armed Forces Operational Command.

However, the PiS government wants to restore the previous command system. According to the *Defence Concept* “after the reform, the role of the ‘first soldier’ will be played by the Chief of the General Staff of the Polish Armed Forces and the subordinated new commands of the individual services of the armed forces: Land Forces, Air Force, Navy, Special Operations Forces, and Territorial Defence Forces. The Chief of the General Staff will also be responsible for commanding the armed forces in the country and abroad, as well as planning their strategic deployment.

The reform of the system was designed to be coherent with the proposed model of the 2032 Polish Armed Forces. The General Command of the Armed Forces and the Operational Command of the Armed Forces will be disbanded. The tasks of the former will be transferred to service commands, and of the latter – to the newly established Training and Command Inspectorate, which will also coordinate training issues. Both the Training and Command Inspectorate and the Support Inspectorate of the Armed Forces will be subordinated to the Chief of the General Staff. He will be supported by two deputies, responsible for the planning of defence operations and for the support of the armed forces, respectively. Due to the importance of logistics, the Support Inspectorate of the Armed Forces will be elevated to the strategic-operational level. The General Staff will be a part of the Ministry of National Defence, following the guidelines of the leadership in order to ensure civilian control of the military. The officers of the General Staff will be implementing defence policy guidelines created in the reformed MOND Defence Policy Division and approved by the civilian leadership of the Ministry.”<sup>20</sup>

In 2017, the Polish Armed Forces consisted of 130,000 active duty and 62,000 active reserve personnel, including Land Forces (*Wojska Lądowe*), 77,000; Air Force (*Siły Powietrzne*), 17,500; Navy (*Marynarka Wojenna*), 8,500; Special Forces (*Wojska Specjalne*), 2,500; and the Territorial Defence Force (*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej*), 11,700.

At the same time, NATO – including the Enhanced Forward Presence on the Eastern Flank – is responsible for maintaining Poland’s general regional security situation. That is why Poland

---

<sup>19</sup> *The Constitution of the Republic of Poland*, [www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm](http://www.sejm.gov.pl/prawo/konst/angielski/kon1.htm).

<sup>20</sup> Ministry of National Defence, Republic of Poland, *The Defence Concept of the Republic of Poland*, <http://en.mon.gov.pl/documents/category/dokumenty/the-defence-concept-of-the-republic-of-poland-j-103276>.

demanding the Alliance increase its military presence on the Eastern Flank and stressed that it is possible under the Russia-NATO Founding Act, even if Russia had broken it many times.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusions

Russia's annexation of Crimea and engagement in the war in Donbas was the starting point for the discussion about the security situation of Poland and the condition of the Polish Armed Forces. What is more, Russia has come to be seen as the main threat to the region, not only by the Polish authorities but also by the Polish public. This was reflected both in the Polish strategic debate and documents and in opinion polls, and even now it is visible within the political and wider public debate. Moreover, issues connected with the modernisation of the Polish Armed Forces are still discussed in the media and between the main political forces.

Russia has showed that it is ready to conduct military operations against its neighbours. That has changed the security situation, not only in Central and Eastern Europe but also for NATO, since Russia neighbours four countries on the Alliance's Eastern Flank. At the request of Poland and the Baltic States, NATO decided to strengthen its military presence on the Eastern Flank. Warsaw also accelerated decisions about strengthening the Polish Armed Forces. Moreover, for the foreseeable future, Russian policy will have the greatest impact on the security environment in Central and Eastern Europe.

**Anna Maria Dyner**

*Head, Eastern Europe Programme, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)*



*The report is part of the project "From Situational Analysis to Foresight: Deepening the Understanding of Immediate and Strategic Futures in the EU's Eastern Neighbourhood", which is implemented by the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in cooperation with the Minsk Dialogue Track-II Initiative. The project receives financial support from the European Parliament. Sole liability rests with the project implementers; the European Parliament is not responsible for the contents.*



---

<sup>21</sup> For more, see: A. M. Dyner, A. Kacprzyk, W. Lorenz, M. Terlikowski, "How Russian Violations of the 1997 Founding Act Influence NATO-Russia Relations," *PISM Policy Paper*, No. 6 (166), 2018, [www.pism.pl](http://www.pism.pl).