

INFORMATION WAR – PROPAGANDA ABOUT HISTORY

Poles on Russian propaganda about history



Warsaw 2020



THE CENTRE
FOR POLISH-RUSSIAN
DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING

Report on public opinion research in Poland

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Report on public opinion research in Poland

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Introduction – context and research objective

In recent years Polish-Russian relations have seen tensions arising from conflicting interpretations of 20th century history. Other issues have receded to be a backdrop for more or less forceful Russian propaganda statements about historical events and trends, mainly connected to World War II (WWII).

The content and style of these Russian attacks can be described as 'neo-Stalinist': they recall motifs in Soviet pre-war propaganda and later 'official' history as published in post-war school text-books. From the standpoint of a Polish interpretation of history this looks like Russian historical revisionism – calling into question known and officially established facts and assessments. A glaring example of this is way the current Russian authorities explain the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact: it is once again being justified and 'relativized' despite earlier condemnation of it.

Increasingly aggressive Russian propaganda about history is widely recognised as part of an information war waged by Russia against the EU and NATO. For historical and geopolitical reasons Poland is a natural target for these attacks. Both the Polish and Russian peoples give their own historical heritage great importance as part of everyday life and public debate. Statements by Russian politicians and Russian media and reactions and responses from

the Polish side evoke strong emotions, attract attention and are widely discussed. That said, the media profile of these issues has been less pronounced during the coronavirus pandemic, with public attentions elsewhere.

As both countries will be celebrating significant anniversaries of important events in WWII, the calendar of historical anniversaries is set to prompt the return of the propaganda offensive. The seventy-fifth anniversary of the end of WWII in May 2020 may be a pretext for the next round of this campaign, despite the cancelling of the Red Square parade.

It is in this context that the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding ('the Centre') commissioned the public opinion poll whose findings are presented here. The survey's main objective was to identify Poles' attitudes to Russian propaganda about history and how they see Poland's response to these moves. Respondents shared their knowledge about specific Russian propaganda statements and their accompanying emotions.

The report accordingly sheds light on social awareness in Poland concerning Russia's campaign of falsifying and relativising 20th century history that has been under way for several years and that casts a deep shadow on Polish-Russian relations.

Information about the survey

Methodology

This was a quantitative survey carried out by computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI).

The survey drew on a sample of 1,005 adult Poles representative of the Poland's composition in sex, age, size of village / town / city, and voivodeship.

The data was collected from 14 to 21 April 2020.

A methodological note: the numbers do not always add up to 100% with multiple-choice questions. For single-choice questions minimal deviations from 100% arise from percentage rounding.

Sample structure

Figure 1. Sex

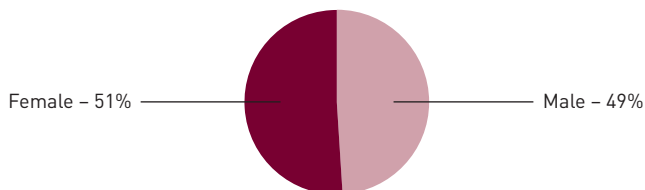
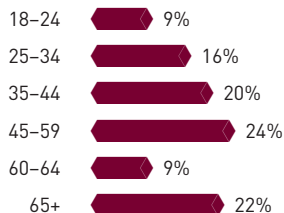
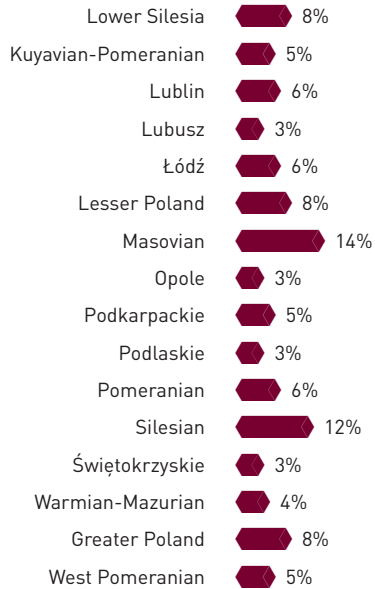
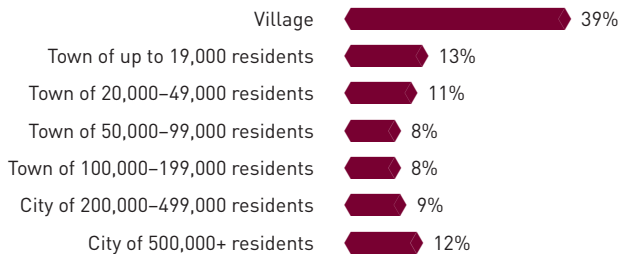


Figure 2. Age



Note: to capture statistical differences in some cases an alternative breakdown by age group

was applied: 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54 (15%), 55-64 (17%) and 65+.

Figure 3. Education**Figure 4. Voivodeship****Figure 5. Size of village / town / city**

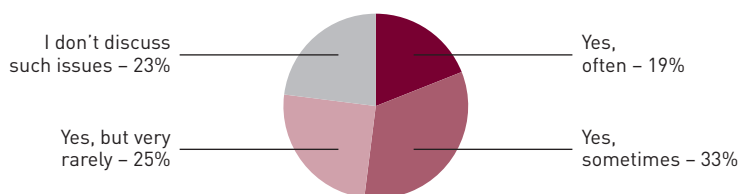
General assessment of Polish-Russian relations

Poles quite often talk about international relations: 77% of respondents say that they discuss these issues with friends or family, at least from time to time. Interest in such issues increases with education; 62% among respondents with primary or secondary education and up to 90% for people with higher education. Overall one in five respondents raises such issues quite often.

23% of Poles don't talk about these issues. There is a generational gap here: 33% of the oldest age group (65+) say that they don't discuss international relations.

Figure 6. International relations as a topic of conversation

Do you discuss international affairs with your family or acquaintances?

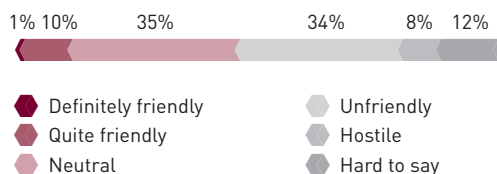


Poles as a whole take a critical view of relations between Poland and Russia: 42% assess them as hostile or unfriendly. This changes with age: 53% of the oldest age group (65+)

take this view, but only 26% of young people (18-24) agree. Overall only 11% of respondents describe Poland's relations with Russia as friendly.

Figure 7. Assessment of Poland's relations with Russia

How would you describe current relations between Poland and Russia?



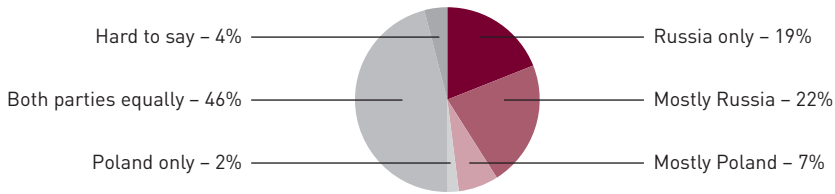
Nearly half (46%) of those who see relations between Poland and Russia as being in a poor state see both sides as equally responsible for this situation. 41% think that the Russian side is to blame; only 9% of Poles think that Poland is responsible.

Attribution of responsibility for poor relations between Poland and Russia correlates strongly with age. 72% of young respondents (18–24) see the two countries as equally responsible, while only 40% of older respondents (65+) share this opinion. The tendency to attribute responsibility to the Russian side increases with age (from 27% in the 18–24 age group, through 31%

in the 25–34 age group, 33% in the 35–44 age group, 47% in the 45–59 age group, to 49% in the 60–65 age group and 46% among respondents aged 65+).

This is also reflected in education. Respondents with higher education are more likely (59%) to see both countries as responsible for poor bilateral relations. This falls to 42% for respondents with secondary education and 38% for respondents with primary or vocational education. A tendency to attribute responsibility solely to Russia is strongest within this latter group (53%).

Figure 8. Responsibility for poor relations between Poland and Russia
In your opinion, who is responsible for poor relations between Poland and Russia?



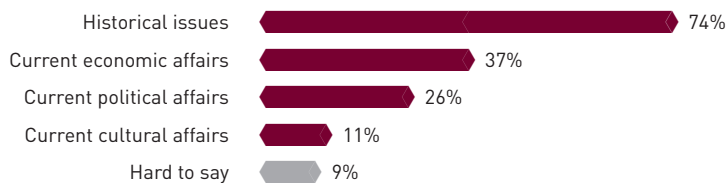
Polish society sees historical issues as the main cause of disagreements between Poland and Russia (mentioned by 74% of Poles).

Regardless of demographic differences, historical disputes are seen by all respondents as the most frequent cause of disagreements between Poland and Russia; this view

is most widespread among better-educated respondents.

Current affairs also result in tensions, especially those related to economic interests (37%) and political issues (26%). Cultural issues are less often (11%) mentioned as a reason for conflict.

Figure 9. Disagreements between Poland and Russia
What is the bone of contention between Poland and Russia?



Among political issues leading to disagreements between Poland and Russia, the Smolensk air crash and Russia's refusal to hand over the wreckage of the plane are seen

by Poles as the dominating issue. Other political issues including Nord Stream and Russia's invasion of Ukraine are much less prominent.

Figure 10. Disagreements between Poland and Russia: political issues

What is the bone of contention between Poland and Russia?

Answer: Current political affairs, which?

Most frequent answers (> 5%) are presented in the figure



The study looked at the preferred way to name Russia's predecessor, the Soviet Union. Most Poles (85%) opt for *Związek Radziecki*.

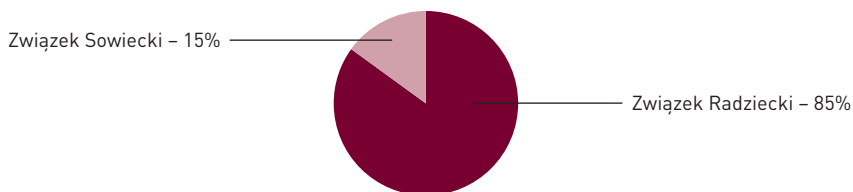
percentage (28%) of respondents who opt for this name reside in the Lublin voivodeship.

As few as 15% of Poles prefer the name *Związek Sowiecki*. The percentage is higher (up to 23%) among the oldest age group (65+) and interestingly the name is more popular among men (20%) than women (11%). The highest

There is a correlation between the name applied to the predecessor of the Russian Federation and how Poles see the state of Polish-Russian relations. The more negative the perceived relations, the more often the respondents prefer the term *Związek Sowiecki*.

Figure 11. *Związek Radziecki* or *Związek Sowiecki*: the name of the communist state, the predecessor of the Russian Federation

Which name do you use most often when speaking of the communist state, Russia's predecessor?



Both names carry negative emotions, but *Związek Sowiecki* evokes a worse feeling. 67% of Poles agree that the name generates negative emotions, whereas only 45% think that about *Związek Radziecki*.

Figure 12. Connotations of the term 'Związek Radziecki' (Soviet Union)

What connotations does the term 'Związek Radziecki' (Soviet Union) have for you?

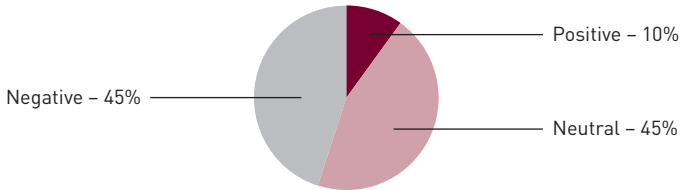
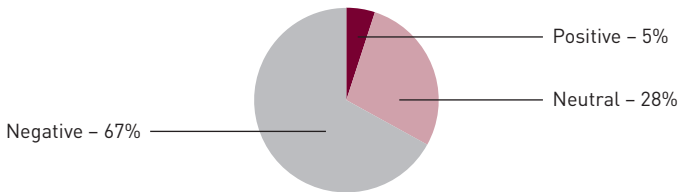


Figure 13. Connotations of the term 'Związek Sowiecki' (Soviet Union)

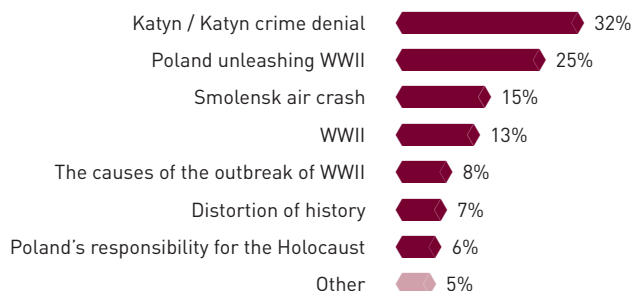
What connotations does the term 'Związek Sowiecki' (Soviet Union) have for you?



Awareness of Russian official opinions and attitudes to them

Poles encounter Russian historical revisionism quite often, and are most familiar with Russian denial of the Katyn massacre and other issues related to WWII.

Figure 14. Historical issues in Russian official opinions: unprompted responses
What Russian statements on Poland-related historical events are you aware of?
The most frequent replies (>5% of respondents) are presented in the figure



The second Russian propaganda claim about history that Poles most frequently meet is the view that history is falsified in Poland by erasing memories of its 'Red Army liberators'. 73% of respondents have heard such a message (older people more often; 81% among the 65+ age group, but 62% in the 18–24 age group).

It is noteworthy that one in five Poles considers this position credible. However, more than 50% of those who have heard this view take the opposite view [note: only respondents familiar with this claim commented on its credibility].

69% of Poles (fewer in the age group 25–34) have heard of the Russian authorities denying Soviet aggression against Poland on September 17, 1939. The great majority of respondents (80%) believe that the claim is false. Only 8% take the opposite point of view.

61% of Poles (75% among respondents aged 65+) had heard about the claim Russian that in 1934 Poland signed with the Third Reich an agreement identical to that signed by the Soviet Union in 1939 (Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact). Almost two thirds of respondents believe that

this is false. The statement was regarded as credible by 7% of respondents.

The Russian claim that Poland occupied Zaolzie in collusion with the Third Reich in 1938 is the fourth most well-known assertion. 57% of Poles have heard it, and some 20% incline to believe it. Half of the Polish recipients of the claim regard it as a historical lie.

One in three Poles had heard the claim that Poland was partially responsible for the Holocaust, as the Polish Ambassador to Germany had told Hitler that Poles would erect a monument to him should he solve the problem of the excessive number of Jews in Europe. The credibility of this particular message is low; a bare 4% of respondents agreed with it.

Figure 15. Contact with Russia’s history propaganda statements
Have you heard of the following opinions coming from Russia and related to historical issues?

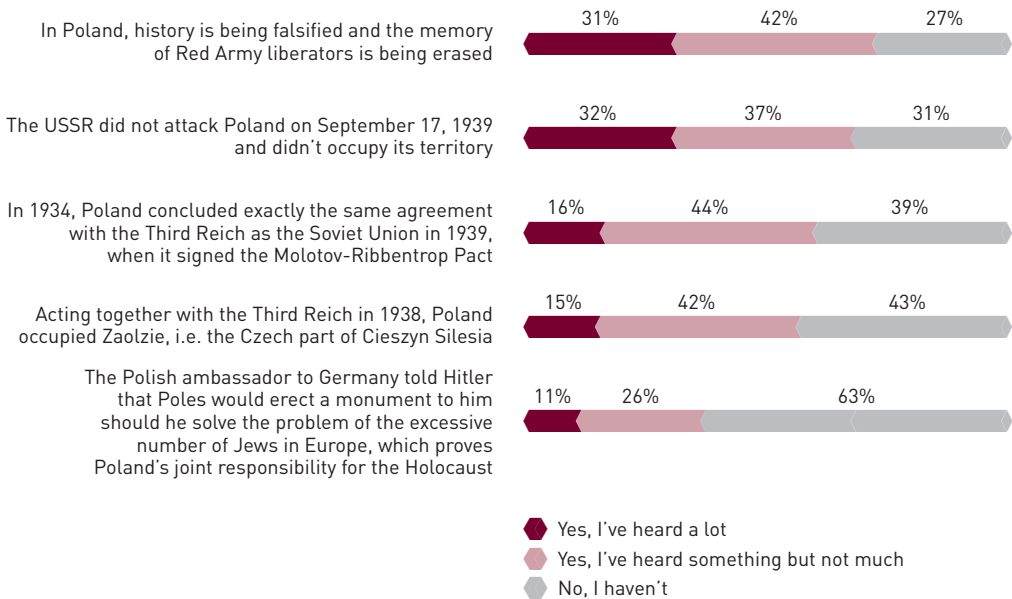
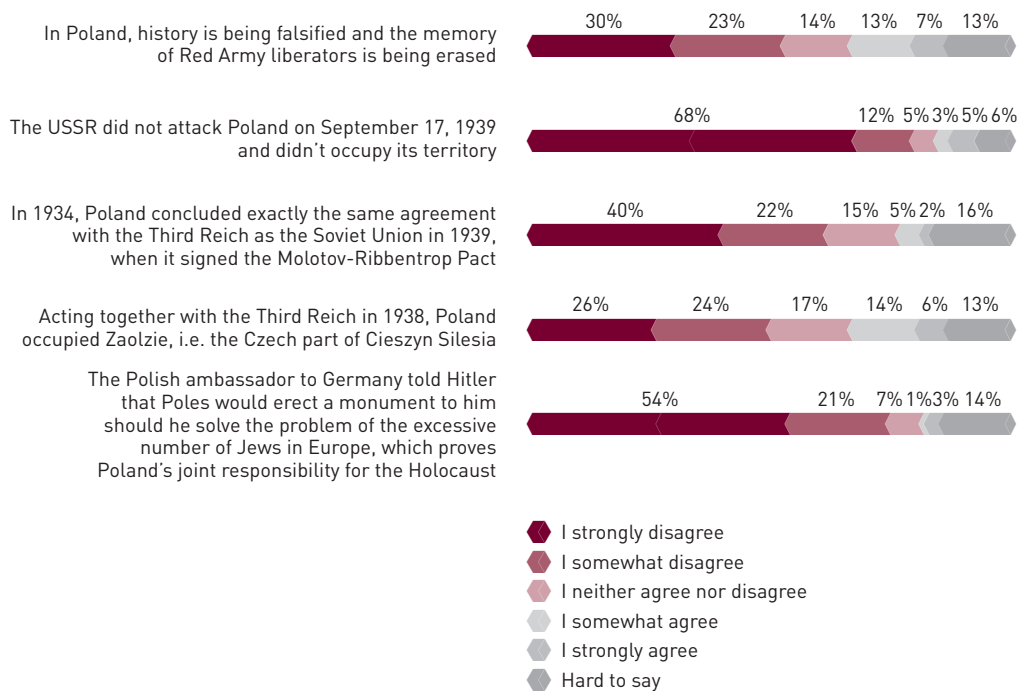


Figure 16. Attitude to Russia's statements

To what extent do you agree or disagree with the theses put forward by representatives of Russia regarding the historical statements cited earlier?



Of the reasons Poles see as motivating these moves by the Russian authorities, an intention to discredit Poland and improve Russia's image are to the fore (14%). Poles also believe that the Russian side aims to falsify history (11%) and

cause tensions and conflicts between peoples (10%). Such actions are also seen as a way to take and maintain power. 6% accuse Russia of having imperialistic ambitions, or even wanting to take over Poland.

Figure 17. Reasons for Russia's actions: unprompted responses

*How do you interpret such opinions by the Russian authorities?
What does Putin want to achieve?*

The most frequent replies (>5% of respondents) are presented in the figure



When asked how they see different popular interpretations of the motives of the Russian government actions, Poles usually (58%) indicate the intent to discredit Poland in the international arena.

Nearly half of Poles (48%) believe that these actions come from emotional reactions by the Russian authorities to Polish historical opinions.

A similar percentage of Poles (47%) think that the Russian authorities want to show Russians that they are defending the good name of the USSR and Red Army soldiers.

22% of Poles see Moscow's unfavourable historical narrative about Poland as a reaction by the Russian authorities to the removal in Poland of monuments to Soviet soldiers.

Figure 18. Reasons behind Russia's actions

In your opinion, what are the reasons behind actions by the Russian authorities?



Poles react quite emotionally to Russian propaganda activity, most often with anger-like emotions of indignation (42%) and irritation (35%).

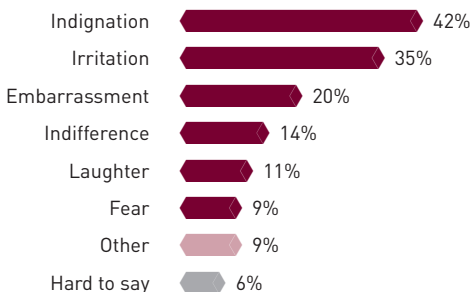
One in five Poles feels embarrassment, while 11% react with laughter (men rather more

often than women). 9% (women more often than men) feel fear.

14% of Poles are indifferent – men more frequently than women.

Figure 19. Emotional reactions

What are your emotional reactions to Russia’s propaganda moves used to manipulate and deny historical facts?



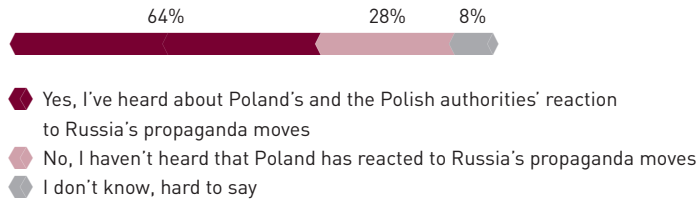
Assessment of Poland's response

A relatively large group of Poles (64%, men and older respondents more frequently) is aware of Poland's reaction to Russia's propaganda and

anti-Polish moves. However, 28% of Poles (and as many as 49% of Poles in the youngest 18–24 age-group) did not notice any response.

Figure 20. Poland's response

Are you aware, i.e. have you heard / read of Poland's reaction to the allegations of the Russian authorities against Poland?

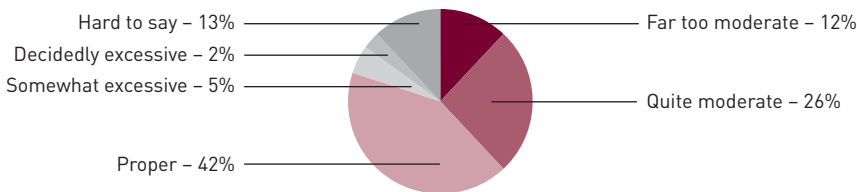


Poles differ in how they see the response of Poland and the Polish authorities to Russia's propaganda. 42% of respondents see the

reactions are proper and adequate. 38% believe they are too weak. Only 7% think Poland's response is too strong.

Figure 21. Poland's response

How do you assess Poland's and Polish authorities' reactions to Russia's propaganda moves? In your opinion, Poland's reaction and response was:



Poles expect an active response by Poland to Russia's moves: only 9% of Poles believe that it's better to ignore them. The most popular response (43%) particularly among people aged 25–34 (60%) is to push back by presenting

the Polish point of view. 27% of Poles want exposure of this manipulation in Russia itself. Only 9% of Poles support lowering diplomatic relations.

Figure 22. Expectations as regards Poland

In your opinion, what should Poland's reaction to Russia's moves be?



Poles tend to think that Poland should coordinate its response to Russia's moves with the governments of Lithuania and Ukraine, although this approach raises some controversies and has its opponents.

42% of respondents see such coordinated actions as improving the potential for an effective response to aggressive Kremlin policy.

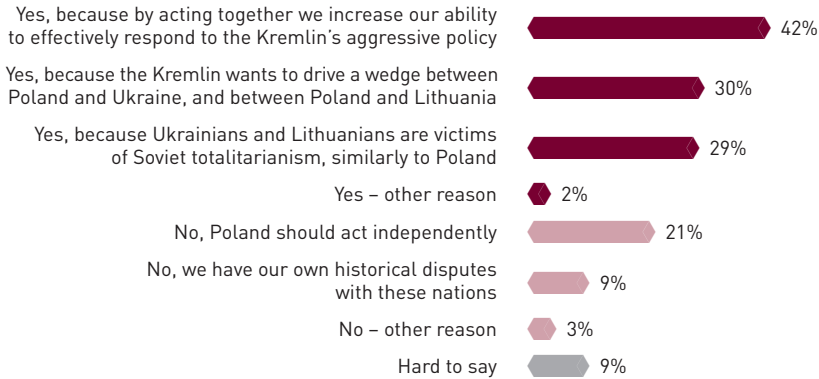
30% of Poles believe that such activity will act against Kremlin-created divisions between these countries.

A similar percentage of respondents believes that coordinated actions should be promoted as these nations were all victims of Soviet totalitarianism.

Opponents of such cooperation indicate that Poland should act alone (21%). One in ten Poles thinks that historical disputes with Ukrainians and Lithuanians are an argument against a coordinated response.

Figure 23. Attitude to coordinated actions with Lithuania and Ukraine

The Russian authorities regularly accuse Lithuania and Ukraine of self-justifying their cooperation with Hitler, lack of gratitude to the Red Army for liberating these countries and removing Soviet monuments. Should Poland therefore coordinate its response to Russia's moves with the authorities of Lithuania and Ukraine?



Summary

Poles notice and are readily aware of Russia's propaganda campaign especially related to WWII history. Three quarters of respondents point to historical issues as the main bone of contention between Poland and Russia. Current economic interests, political and cultural issues per se are seen as less important. According to Poles, themes from history dominate Poland's relations with Russia across the whole agenda.

Without doubt (as shown by unprompted answers during the survey) the main issue is the Katyn massacre, namely attempts to deny or qualify ('relativise') Soviet responsibility for this crime. Then come themes linked to Poland's alleged contribution to the start of WWII, namely Poland's dealings with the Third Reich and the occupation of Zaolzie. The Smolensk air crash combines history and current politics: respondents see Russian behaviour as including this tragedy with narrower historical issues.

When presented with individual messages from Russian media, respondents were mainly familiar with claims that Poland has been erasing the memory of Soviet soldiers as liberators of Polish territory. It is worth noting that this accusation (made not only against Poland but against any country that tries to alter the Soviet canon of commemorating the Red Army) is most directly aimed at the current history policy of the Polish state.

Poles clearly see tensions in Polish-Russian relations. Opinions vary about the responsibility for this state of affairs; as many as 46% of respondents tend to see both parties as being at fault. A slightly smaller percentage of Poles blame the Russian side only. There is a strong correlation between these opinions and respondents' age. As many as 72% of younger

respondents see both sides as sharing responsibility, whereas 40% of the oldest respondents take this view.

Higher educational level also makes more likely an assumption of 'symmetrical responsibility' for the poor state of Polish-Russian relations. Perhaps this attitude comes from the usually greater awareness of respondents with higher education of the complexity of international relations. However, it may also indicate some sort of political correctness which requires one to see other people's point of view, or psychological mechanisms deceptively suggesting that truth must always lie somewhere in the middle.

This is one of the most important findings of this research. If one asks whether Russia's activity is having the intended effect, the above indicators could be taken as confirming that propaganda indeed can be effective. And although at a declarative level Russian propaganda meets criticism and elicits negative emotions, some of these statements find their supporters in Poland: belittling the role of the Red Army in liberating Poland, and Poland's armed seizure of Zaolzie as evidence of Poland's collusion with the Third Reich. Both opinions are regarded as credible by 20% of those familiar with them.

Poles see the key motive behind Russia's actions as the desire to create an unfavourable image of Poland and thereby discredit Poland in the international arena. This current international context of history propaganda is accurately 'decoded' by Polish public opinion.

Poles expect Poland to react actively to propaganda moves by the Russian government, in particular by presenting its own point of view, by protesting, and by publicising Kremlin manipulations. Poles are divided on Poland's

response: 42% see it as adequate, whereas 38% see it as too weak.

The findings presented here illustrate that Polish public opinion is generally aware of Russia's history propaganda. The majority of these opinions do not find fertile soil, being

rejected for rational reasons and at the emotional level. However, Russia's consistent pushing of some of these claims could have helped create the impression among a significant number of the Poles that responsibility for the poor state of relations with Russia does not lie solely on the Russian side.

The survey's main objective was to identify Poles' attitudes to Russian propaganda about history and how they see Poland's response to these moves. Respondents shared their knowledge about specific Russian propaganda statements and their accompanying emotions. The report

accordingly sheds light on social awareness in Poland concerning Russia's campaign of falsifying and relativising 20th century history that has been under way for several years and that casts a deep shadow on Polish-Russian relations.



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