



American perspective on Poland's ambitions to become the leader of Central and Eastern Europe in the face of the war in Ukraine

Łukasz Jureńczyk

Faculty of Political Sciences and Administration,
Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland

lukaszjurenczyk@ukw.edu.pl

ORCID [0000-0003-1149-925X](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1149-925X)

Abstract. The article analyzes and assesses the American perspective on the ambitions of the Polish Law and Justice authorities to become the leader of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the war in Ukraine. The research question is whether Poland is perceived by the American authorities as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe and to what extent the war in Ukraine has an impact on this? The hypothesis assumes that Poland's decisive actions in response to the war in Ukraine had a significant positive impact on the American perception of Poland's potential leadership role in the region. Regional integration projects co-initiated by Poland in recent years also had a positive impact. Whether Poland will deepen the image of the CEE leader will depend to a large extent on the outcome of the war in Ukraine and the ability of the Polish authorities to capitalize on the role that Poland played during the war. In order to find an answer to the research question, interviews were conducted with scientists and experts from research institutes in Washington D. C. and New York. During the research, experts and scientists from research institutions in Washington D. C. and New York were interviewed. Selected documents and political statements were also examined using the method of content analysis of text sources.

Keywords: Poland, Central and Eastern Europe, regional leadership, United States, war in Ukraine.

JEL Classification: F51, F52, F53.

Citation: Jureńczyk, Ł. (2025). American perspective on Poland's ambitions to become the leader of Central and Eastern Europe in the face of the war in Ukraine. *Eastern European Journal of Transnational Relations*, 9(1), 117-129.

<https://doi.org/10.15290/ejtr.2025.09.01.10>

Publisher's Note:



Copyright: © 2025 Author. Submitted for open access publication under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Polish strategic culture of the 21st century, maintaining the involvement of the United States in Europe, including the stationing of American troops in Poland, is of key importance. Serious concern in Poland was caused by the strategic shifts in US foreign and security policy during the Barack Obama administration, i.e. the "reset" of relations with Russia and the "Pivot to Asia". These were to be pursued at the expense of American involvement in Europe, including in Central and Eastern Europe (Lanoszka, 2020, p. 464-465). Polish thinking about the alliance

with the US has a traditional threat-centric character and is intended to protect Poland and CEE from the imperial policy of Russia. In recent years, the tightening of the alliance is also due to the distrust of the Polish authorities of the Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość – PiS) political camp towards Brussels, Berlin and Paris (Goh & Sahashi, 2020, p. 379). The PiS authorities want the United States to recognize Poland's ambitions to become the leader of CEE.

The aim of the paper is to analyze and evaluate the American perspective on the ambitions of the Polish Law and Justice authorities to become the leader of Central and Eastern Europe in the context of the war in Ukraine. The main research problem is the question of whether Poland is perceived by the American authorities as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe and to what extent the war in Ukraine has an impact on this. The main hypothesis assumes that Poland's decisive and pioneering role in helping Ukraine and Ukrainians has significantly increased the importance of the country in the European policy of the United States and contributed to the increased perception of Poland as a regional leader. However, this recognition is informal, and further strengthening of this image will depend on the outcome of the war in Ukraine, as well as the ability of the Polish authorities to capitalize on the support provided to Ukraine and the United States. The article focuses on the economic, political and military aspects of the state's potential. During the research, scientists and experts from research institutions in Washington and New York were interviewed. The interviews were individual, non-standardized and in-depth. The participants of the interviews were asked not to be guided by courtesy related to the fact that the interviews were conducted by a Pole, and to answer only in accordance with their knowledge and beliefs. The research also used the method of content analysis of text sources. It was helpful in the analysis of American national security strategies and speeches of American and Polish politicians.

2. AMBITIONS OF THE LAW AND JUSTICE AUTHORITIES OF POLAND'S LEADERSHIP IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

The strategic thinking of the conservative parties that have been in power in Poland since 2015 is geopolitical in nature with strong references to the past, including the Jagiellonian era and Sarmatism, when Poland was a regional power. One of the key priorities of the PiS authorities is the development of regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland initiates various geopolitical and geoeconomical projects in the region, seeking support from its neighbors. These projects are to lead to an increase in the importance of Poland and CEE on the international arena and to communicate the emergence of a regional space of understanding (Pawluszko, 2022, p. 30). An important success factor is gaining support for these projects from the United States. Already in 2002, Jan Nowak Jeziorański wrote about the key role of the USA for Poland's security and its regional aspirations: "Poland needs the United States as an element of balance in the face of the predominance of our two great neighbors and as an integrating force, and at the same time closing the path to expansion of both Russia and Germany" (Orzelska-Stączek, 2011, p. 62). The success of the implementation of regional projects is to consolidate the status of Poland as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe. It is also to put an end to the perception of the region as backward and civilizationally underdeveloped in relation to Western Europe and the USA, which is a consequence of various coinciding social, economic, political, and historical circumstances. At the same time, it is supposed to break with the feeling of inferiority of the inhabitants of Poland and CEE (Snochowska-Gonzalez, 2012, p. 717-718).

Already in 2010, during the presidential election campaign, the president of Law and Justice and the then presidential candidate Jarosław Kaczyński believed that Poland had to become the leader of Central and Eastern Europe. He expressed the opinion that most of the countries of the region perceived Poland as a country that could be modeled on and could be a leader. According to him, being the leader of the region was supposed to open up a chance for Poland to be of great importance in the European Union and in the world. Justifying his beliefs, he referred to the regional concepts of Józef Piłsudski, Jerzy Giedroyc and his brother Lech Kaczyński (PAP, 2010).

Representatives of the ruling camp in Poland are aware, however, that rapid economic development is also necessary to achieve the goal of becoming a regional leader. Mateusz Morawiecki, assuming the office of Prime Minister in December 2017, presented an ambitious plan to get Poland out of the "medium development trap" and to quickly reduce the distance to the developed countries of Western Europe. On 21 January 2020 in Davos, Switzerland, during the 50th World Economic Forum, President Andrzej Duda said: "I am proud to say that Poland is a leader of growth in Central and Eastern Europe [...] It has a vibrant business environment with relatively low taxes and, above all, a pool of young talents." The president also emphasized the importance of the region itself and regional cooperation: "Over the last three decades, the countries of Central Eastern Europe have undergone remarkable economic growth [...] I believe that the countries of our region will best use their full economic potential through close cooperation." (President.pl, 2020) .

3. POLAND'S POTENTIAL IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

Between 1990 and 2021, Poland's GDP increased from USD 66 billion to USD 679 billion (The World Bank, 2022). The Polish economy has been relatively immune to the negative consequences of global crises. Poland is the largest economy in the CEE covering 22% of the region's population, and 30% of its GDP . Poland's advantages include its embedding in Western security and integration structures, economic stability, sound banking system, relatively business-friendly environment, social capital, location and communication. According to the FDI Market, in 2021, Poland received a record-breaking inflow of direct foreign investments, and ranked third in the EU, after Germany and Sweden, in terms of investment value. Poland is also the European leader in the number of jobs created as a result of foreign investments in the years 2019-2021. Poland benefits from the necessity of shortening supply chains by Europe in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine (Morawiecki, 2022). One of the main problems remains the limited innovativeness of the Polish economy. In 2022, entities from Poland submitted 615 patent applications to the European Patent Organisation, which was a historical record. As usual, this was the largest number in the region, but compared to the most innovative economies from Europe and the world, this result still looks very poor. In the same year, the leader of the ranking - the USA - submitted 48,088 patent applications to the EPO, and the second country - Germany - 24,684. Poland was preceded by 24 countries, including 14 from Europe (European Patent Organisation, 2023). This is very important because without innovation it is impossible to advance in the economic hierarchy of countries.

Poland's international position has significantly increased after joining NATO and the European Union. Within the European Union, Poland has been trying to strengthen its position for years, both by tightening relations with Western powers and by trying to co-shape the EU's eastern policy. Polish politicians took the highest positions in the EU - Donald Tusk was the President of the European Council, and Jerzy Buzek was the President of the European Parliament. In May 2008, the diplomacy of Poland and Sweden proposed the EU's Eastern Partnership, formally launched in Prague in May 2009. At the same time, the Polish authorities have been strengthening Poland's position in NATO. According to U.S. Department of Defense Poland has played a key role in supporting NATO's combat credible deterrence and defense posture in CEE (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Diane Francis (2023) of the Atlantic Council wrote: "Since joining NATO in 1999, Poland has emerged as a security linchpin on the alliance's eastern flank. This has been possible thanks to Poland's strategic location and remarkable economic growth, which has helped fund the rapid modernization and expansion of the country's armed forces." Poland has also actively worked to maintain international peace and security, engaging in military missions under the leadership of NATO and the US, including in Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq. In this way, Poland has consolidated its position in NATO and allied credibility towards the USA (Zdravkovski, 2019, p. 28). The 2023 Global Fire Power Index denotes Poland as the world's twentieth military power. Among the countries in the region, only Russia (2nd) and Ukraine (15th) were ranked ahead of Poland, and Romania was far behind (47th) (Global Firepower, 2023). Roger

Boyes from *The Times* emphasizes that Poland has ambitions to create Europe's largest land army, which is to take place with unequivocal support from the US and to be an important architect of the revival of the western alliance (Boyes, 2023). For 2023, Poland declared defense spending exceeding 4% of GDP. In recent years the Polish army has signed multi-billion contracts for modern military equipment and armament, mainly from American and South Korean companies.

4. THE UNITED STATES TOWARDS POLAND'S REGIONAL INITIATIVES

The United States has supported regional geopolitical and geoeconomic projects co-initiated by Poland in recent years. The flagship project - the Three Seas Initiative (3SI or TSI) was proposed by the presidents of Poland and Croatia - Andrzej Duda and Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović. The first TSI meeting took place on 29 September 2015 in New York, and was attended by twelve European Union Member States situated between the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas¹. The initiative was influenced by the Polish interwar "Intermarium" concept (Kowal & Orzelska-Stączek, 2019, p. 21-28). The declaration of the first TSI summit in Dubrovnik of 26 August 2016 defines its functioning formula: "as an informal platform for securing political support and decisive action on specific cross-border and macro-regional projects of strategic importance to the States involved in energy, transportation, digital communication and economic sectors in Central and Eastern Europe." (Three Seas, 2016). According to many observers, this project has important geopolitical aspirations, aimed at balancing the two centers of power, i.e. Russia and Western Europe. According to Ryszard Zięba (2018, p. 447), however, this is not possible due to the limited potential of the countries in the region and their diversified interests. As part of the TSI, Poland and the United States have convergent interests, which is conducive to its strong support by Washington. A manifestation of the support was the presence of President Donald Trump at the second TSI summit in Warsaw on 6-7 July 2017. The American administration declared USD 1 billion for projects implemented under the initiative, mainly in the field of energy security of the region (Jančoškova, 2017, p. 235). This amount is not impressive at the moment, but it may increase over time. Poland and the United States are cooperating to reduce CEE's energy dependence on Russia. In recent years, the US has become an increasingly important exporter of LNG, including to Europe, and Poland has aspirations to become the main hub for US LNG in the region, which is realistic from the US perspective (Michalik, 2019, p. 144). Both countries opposed the German-Russian Nord Stream 2 project, which they saw as a political undertaking threatening the energy security of the region. Polish-American energy cooperation has also been extended to other sectors, including nuclear energy, and the United States has begun to play a key role as Poland's partner in the energy transformation process (U.S. Energy Department, 2018).

The concept of establishing the Bucharest Nines (B9) appeared during the meeting of the presidents of Poland and Romania - Bronislaw Komorowski and Klaus Iohannis on 22 July 2014 in Warsaw. Its inauguration took place during the meeting of nine countries² of NATO's eastern flank on 4 November 2015 in Bucharest, organized by Presidents Andrzej Duda and Klaus Iohannis. B9 is: "a platform of consultations and dialogue to promote joint approaches and common projects to the benefit of Euro-Atlantic security." First of all, it takes actions to strengthen NATO's eastern flank in the face of the growing threat from Russia, to tighten military cooperation and to push through the security interests of the region on the NATO forum (Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas, 2015). B9 advocates maintaining close ties with the US, including the presence of American troops in the region (Banasik, 2021, p. 30-31). In the 2015 US National Security Strategy Washington ensured the intensification of US efforts to increase defense and deterrence in Central and Eastern Europe in response to Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine

¹ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia.

² Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia.

(The White House, 2015, p. 25). In turn, in the 2022 NSS, after Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, the US assured about its readiness to defend "every inch of NATO territory" (The White House, 2022, p. 17, 26). The United States met the main expectations of the Bucharest 9 states. Among other things, it decided to send to Poland in 2017 an Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve and a battalion battle group within NATO enhanced Forward Presence (eFP) (Larsen, 2017, p. 12). It also located divisional and corps level headquarters in Poland. With the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine, the US further increased the number of troops in the region, including up to 10,000 in Poland. The United States also transferred significant amounts of military equipment to the CEE countries and intensified participation in military exercises in the region. These actions are a manifestation of the US commitment to the security of NATO's eastern flank. A symbolic manifestation of US support for B9 was the participation of President Joe Biden in its summits on 10 May 2021 in Bucharest and on 22 February 2023 in Warsaw.

On 28 July 2020 in Lublin, the Foreign Ministers of Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine - Linas Linkevičius, Jacek Czaputowicz and Dmytro Kuleba established the Lublin Triangle, which is a trilateral platform for political economic and social cooperation. As part of the platform, it was decided to organize regular meetings and consultations of foreign ministers and high-level MFA officials and to establish liaison-officers within the MFA. One of the important goals of the Lublin Triangle is to support Ukraine in defending its sovereignty and following pro-Western integration aspirations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, 2020). The goals set by the Lublin Triangle are in line with the goals of the US foreign and security policy towards the region. The above three countries of the region had already cooperated closely to include Ukraine in NATO, including as part of the Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade (LITPOLUKRBRIG) formed between 2009 and 2016 with the US support (Fryc, 2020, p. 6-7).

Poland's efforts to obtain the support of the United States for regional initiatives went hand in hand with the tightening of bilateral strategic cooperation, the foundations of which were laid down in August 2008 in *the Declaration on Strategic Cooperation Between the United States of America and the Republic of Poland* (U.S. Department of State, 2008). In September 2018, the strategic partnership was strengthened with the declaration on *Safeguarding freedom, building prosperity through Poland-US Strategic Partnership*. As part of the strategic partnership, cooperation is strengthened mainly in the areas of security, defense and energy, but also trade, investments, research and innovations (President.pl, 2018). Defense is treated as the highest priority, which is why *the Defense Cooperation Agreement* was signed in August 2020. The agreement defined the principles of military cooperation between Poland and the USA, including the stationing of American troops in Poland (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

For years, the United States has appreciated Poland's contribution to increasing the cohesion of the West and strengthening European and transatlantic relations (The White House, 2015, p. 7). In recent years, however, the Polish authorities have developed a trend of disintegration regarding cooperation within the European Union. Poland, like Hungary, is in serious political and legal disputes with the European institutions and Western European powers, which, among others, concern the issues of democracy and the rule of law. As Simon Lewis and Magdalena Waligórska (2019, p. 425) wrote: "The Polish case is particularly poignant not only because of the country's size and its political weight in the East-Central European region but also because of the dramatic trajectory that it has followed [...] Poland has transformed into a country that turns away from the principles of liberal democracy and voted in a party that demonizes the EU as a threat to Polish sovereignty and identity". In recent years, Poland has been reluctant to cooperate with Western powers, including within the framework of the Weimar Triangle³. In turn, the public media in Poland conduct a ruthless campaign against the institutions of the European Union and the authorities of Germany and France. Such a direction is inconsistent with the strategic interests of the US in Europe, which is committed to the integration of the European continent and maintaining Western liberal values (The White House, 2015, p. 25). There were, however, some exceptions in this respect. For example, while the administration

³ Poland, Germany and France.

of Donald Trump had no problem with such an attitude of Poland, the administrations of Barack Obama and Joe Biden saw it as a threat to the unity and cohesion of the West. The United States is increasingly confronting authoritarian Russia and China, for which it needs the West as united as possible.

5. USA ON POLAND'S DECISIVE RESPONSE TO RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE AGGRESSION AGAINST UKRAINE

Steven Pifer (2022) believes that Poland's attitude towards Ukraine has a significant impact on Poland's position in the region. As he notes, after Poland got its entry tickets into both NATO and the European Union, it tried to pull Ukraine along with it. In 1999, the United States permanent representatives to NATO, Alexander R. Vershbow, during his visits to Kiev, informed the Ukrainian side that in order to improve its capabilities in the field of cooperation in NATO, it should turn to either the Americans or the Poles for help. The Polish authorities consistently persuaded Ukrainian partners to take advantage of Poland's transformation experience in implementing Western standards. They were also involved in democratic uprisings in Ukraine, trying to bring it closer to NATO and the EU, seeing it as their national interest. However, as Andrzej Szeptycki (2021, p. 1121, 1129) notes, Poland did not try to dominate Ukraine and its policy towards this country cannot be considered in imperialist terms. Democratic reforms encountered structural problems in Ukraine itself and were hindered by Russia. The full-scale Russian aggression of 24 February 2022 was to put an end to Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations and its sovereignty.

In an interview with the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington, Zbigniew Rau, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs, said about Poland's pioneering role in helping the attacked Ukraine: "In the face of this war Poland was the first to help Ukraine. We became her closest frontline partner, humanitarian supplier, and logistical hub. Not only are we the first among the European allies to send military donations to Ukraine, but we are second behind the United States in all military support. My country also became a refuge and safe haven for over 3 million Ukrainian women and children." (Bergmann, 2022). American leaders appreciated Poland's commitment and reaffirmed its leadership role in responding to the war in Ukraine. During speeches in Warsaw on 26 March 2022 and 21 February 2023, President Joe Biden emphasized the importance of jointly counteracting Russian aggression and defending Ukraine, with the greatest emphasis on Poland's assistance to millions of Ukrainian refugees: "Poland's generosity, your willingness to open your hearts and your homes, is extraordinary." (The White House, 2023a). He referred to relations with Poland, saying: "this is a critical relationship for the United States. And we thank you for all the cooperation and help." (The White House, 2023b). On 11 April 2023 in Washington D.C. Vice President Kamala Harris called Poland the leader of Central and Eastern Europe, pointing to the rightness of its policy towards Russia: "Old Europe believed in an agreement with Russia, and old Europe failed. But there is a new Europe — Europe that remembers what Russian communism was. And Poland is the leader of this new Europe." (The White House, 2023c). Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, during his visit to Rzeszów on 5 March 2022, said: "At this moment of crisis for millions of Ukrainians - and as the security of Europe hangs in the balance - Poland has stepped forward with generosity, with leadership, with resolve." (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland, 2022). On 9 December 2022, in Washington, he said: "I can't think of a time when the United States and Poland and our partnership has been more important and more effective. Thanks to Poland's leadership, we are standing strong in support of Ukraine faced with the Russian aggression – supporting it in terms of security assistance, economic assistance, humanitarian assistance." (U.S. Department of State, 2022). Frequent bilateral meetings at the highest political levels, in a symbolic dimension, confirm the growing importance of Poland in the European policy of the United States.

Poland's reaction to the Russian aggression against Ukraine was appreciated by American experts and commentators. D. Francis (2023) from the Atlantic Council emphasized "Poland's leading role in the European response to Putin's invasion" pointing to its key role in strengthening NATO's eastern flank, setting new standards

in helping refugees, its leading role in supplying arms to Ukraine, including persuading Western partners in increasing military aid, acting as a logistic center for supplies, and a diplomatic offensive to tighten Western sanctions against Russia. A month after the war broke out in Ukraine, Alina Polyakova, president of the Washington-based Center for European Policy Analysis (CEPA), said: "Poland is becoming the Eastern Europe's leader." (PAP, 2022). She emphasized the importance of Poland in the US European security policy and the primacy of this issue over previous disagreements: "Poland is the indispensable ally for European security. Other issues and concerns have just taken a back seat. When push comes to shove, and there is a direct military threat to NATO, we need Poland. It doesn't mean that all is forgiven, but it makes it very clear where the priorities are." (Cienski & Toosi, 2022). The very positive image of Poland in the West, including in the USA, was particularly influenced by the acceptance of a large number of refugees from Ukraine and the creation of very comfortable conditions for them to stay in (Kumar, 2022). William Natrass (2023) of *The Wall Street Journal* stated that the activities of Poland "as the leader of pro-Ukraine sentiment in the bloc" affected the attitude of other countries of the region towards Russia: "Warsaw invests in an expansion of its armed forces, the country is providing impetus for smaller eastern European allies, such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic states, to take an uncompromising stance against Russian aggression." This happens despite the fact that the societies of some countries of the region are deeply divided on the acceptable level of aid to Ukraine. Māris Andžāns (2022) from the Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) of Philadelphia, in turn, emphasized the importance of Poland's efforts to increase the energy security of CEE and make it independent of energy supplies from Russia. These goals are achieved, among others, by the LNG Terminal in Świnoujście and interconnectors with countries in the region, through which American LNG flows.

6. DISCUSSION OF AMERICAN SCIENTISTS AND EXPERTS ON POLAND'S ASPIRATIONS TO LEAD CEE

According to James Goldgeier (2022), Poland has played an extremely important role on the international arena for decades. This concerned, among others, the emergence of the Solidarity movement in the early 1980s, which significantly contributed to the overthrow of the communist regime in Poland and Central and Eastern Europe. Also much of the post Cold War thinking about the region is centered around Poland, because of its size, its history, and its relations with other powers. He believes that: "After joining NATO Poland began to be perceived as one of America's most important allies in Europe, a strategic ally that shares a lot of the same visions as the United States for Europe and therefore a key country for US policy in Europe". After the Cold War, the United States significantly expanded its ties with Poland, especially in the military area, which made Poland one of the "key allies" of the United States in Europe. At the same time, however, according to David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski, Poland consolidated its status of the "client state" towards the USA (Sylvan & Majeski, 2009, p. 69-70). The US Department of State defines relations with Poland as follows: "Poland is a stalwart ally in Central Europe and one of the United States' strongest partners in fostering security and prosperity regionally, throughout Europe, and the world. The United States and Poland partner closely on NATO capabilities, counterterrorism, nonproliferation, missile defense, human rights, economic growth and innovation, energy security, and regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe." (U.S. Department of State, 2019).

After the disappearance of the Soviet Union, significant changes took place in the transatlantic community. In the new world order, dominated by the United States, it turned out that on many important issues, the US and Western European allies have not spoken with one voice, as they did during the Cold War. As Agnieszka Orzelska-Stączek (2011, p. 10-11) wrote: "With time, the list of discrepancies became longer and longer, including issues in the field of international politics, security, economy, environmental protection, and justice". The United States wanted to use the pro-American CEE countries to consolidate its position in Europe, balancing the influence of Western European powers. Poland, unequivocally supporting the US's international policy, seemed to be from Washington's point of view a comfortable candidate for leading Central and Eastern Europe. Already the administration of President Bill

Clinton perceived Poland as a potential leader of CEE. This was due to the fact that Poland, after Russia and Ukraine, was the largest and most populous country in the region, and the process of its political and economic transformation was perceived in the USA as a "success story" (Bouchet, 2015, p. 88). In the following years, in the United States, and more broadly in the West, a positive image of Poland was strengthened (Wróbel, 2010, p. 307-308). At that time, Poland was perceived in the USA as a model of wise development (The White House, 2006, p. 34).

Sharon Wolchik (2022) believes that Poland to some degree has been perceived in the United States as the leader of Central and Eastern Europe. This is due to the fact that Poland is the largest country in Central Europe, has a tradition of friendly relations with the US and a large diaspora in the country. Also according to S. Pifer (2022) Poland plays a leading role in the region, in part, because of its size and in part, because its commitment to institutions such as NATO. James Lebovic (2022) believes that from the American perspective, Poland plays an important role in CEE as a NATO country with the greatest military potential in the region. However, Poland's potential is significant in the context of a broader security community, both as part of the NATO defense system, as a flanking state, and as a force contributor to foreign military operations under the leadership of NATO and the USA. S. Pifer (2022) draws attention to the regional integration projects initiated by Poland. According to him, a particularly important and sensible project is the Three Seas. It has the potential for energy integration of the CEE region within the European Union, and in the longer term it may also become important in connecting countries from outside the EU, such as Ukraine and Moldova, to European energy networks. According to Paula Ganga (2022), Poland is of great importance to the US as a CEE country, especially due to its size, strategic location and economic potential, but it does not necessarily have to be perceived and treated as a regional leader. In addition, she notes that Poland matters if the US actually has important interests in the region, as in the case of the war in Ukraine. According to her, however, the Polish authorities mainly use the phrase "leader of the region" for the purposes of internal propaganda. As Cynthia Roberts (2022) states, it's not for Washington to decide who should lead Europe. Europeans need to settle these questions among themselves. She believes that it is in the interest of the US that Europe is strong and united, which will allow it to be the credible and equal partner for America that it needs. As can be deduced from the above, American researchers believe that Poland is important to the US as a country with the highest potential in CEE, but it does not necessarily have to be considered by Washington as a leader of the region.

The PiS authorities believe that strengthening the position of CEE and Poland's leadership role may take place in opposition to the Western European powers. This is confirmed, among other things, by strong criticism of the internal and international policies of Brussels, as well as those of Berlin and Paris. According to J. Goldgeier (2022), an attempt by Poland to create a camp of states in Central and Eastern Europe in opposition to Western Europe would be a mistake. This is due to the fact that the unity of Europe is in the interest of the US and that Western European powers are extremely important allies for Washington. Building an anti-German or anti-French strategy by Poland in an attempt to get closer to the USA would not succeed in the long run, as it is contrary to the strategic interests of the US in Europe. One has to agree with the above statement, even though earlier, during the periods of tensions between the USA and Western Europe, there was a significant rapprochement between Warsaw and Washington. An example was the administration of George W. Bush, which divided the continent into "New Europe", the dynamic one, with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and "Old Europe", the static one, led by Germany and France. In the former, much more pro-American, President Bush was highly respected, which is why he strengthened political relations with Warsaw and other capitals of the region (Moens, 2016, p. 116). As noted by P. Ganga (2022), the CEE region was of greater importance to the US during the global war on terror, when the Bush administration sought support from the countries of the region in the face of opposition from Western European powers. At that time, Poland was held up as an example because it was ready to support politically, and to some extent militarily, the international activities of the USA. In the case of the controversial war in Iraq, Poland, eagerly supporting the US, decided to seriously strain relations with Germany and France, dominating in the

European Union, which were its unequivocal opponents (Reeves, 2019, p. 1150). This was due to the fact that the Polish authorities primarily based the country's security on the USA and NATO (Doeser, 2018, p. 460). However, the increase in Poland's position in American security policy was only apparent, as it mainly concerned the symbolic sphere. Poland was used instrumentally in building support for controversial US international initiatives, mainly the war in Iraq.

It was similar during the presidency of Donald Trump, who fell into political disputes with the leaders of Western Europe. The ideological proximity of the leaders of Poland and the US, skepticism towards liberal Western organizations and aversion to Western European liberal-leftist elites brought the authorities of both countries closer. Symbolically, Trump's first visit to Europe, starting with Poland rather than one of the traditional Western European powers, gave hope for an increase in the importance of Poland and CEE for the United States (Waśko-Owsiejczuk, 2023, p. 285). As Bohdan Szklarski and Piotr Iłowski (2019, p. 66-67) wrote, however, concerns were raised by President Trump's excessive expectations in terms of proving usefulness and loyalty by weaker allies, such as Poland. As Michael Doyle (2022) notes, the perception of Poland as a leader of Central and Eastern Europe looks different in the eyes of individual administrations. For example, the closeness between Poland under the rule of the Law and Justice and the administration of Donald Trump was not well perceived by the administration of Joe Biden. The illiberal trend in Poland caused skepticism and lack of enthusiasm in the new American administration, which resulted in a periodic cooling of relations between the countries. The above shows that individual administrations approached Poland's aspirations to lead the CEE region in different ways. This was a result of both internal factors in the United States and international circumstances affecting the ability to implement priority goals of international policy.

Given the role of the United States as a global promoter of liberal values, the issue of the condition of democracy and the rule of law plays a certain role in the American perception of Poland. Michael Miller (2022), however, notes that Poland and the US have close military and economic relations, and the main directions of Poland's foreign and security policy are consistent with the directions of US policy. Therefore, the issue of democratic regression in Poland will not have a significant impact on Polish-American cooperation, as it would also have negative consequences for the USA. Although Washington will admonish Poland about respecting liberal democratic principles, this will not translate into a reduction in cooperation. As M. Doyle (2022) notes, the initial reluctance of the Joe Biden administration towards Poland was offset by the outbreak of war in Ukraine. Poland got a "green pass token" on the quality of democracy and the rule of law because of the role it's playing in helping Ukraine and Ukrainians. The above means that if cooperation with Poland in the area of security or economics is of particular importance to the US, the issue of the quality of democracy will not have a significant impact on the US's perception of Poland's regional role.

P. Ganga (2022) points out that the United States is not very interested in Central and Eastern Europe. Unless something really important or horrible happens there, the US might not necessarily really register it. The war in Ukraine is undoubtedly such an event that affects the strategic interests of the USA. In the eyes of the American authorities and society, Poland's position as the leader of CEE significantly increased after the outbreak of the war. As Stephen Biddle (2022) states: "Poland is benefiting enormously right now by being willing to step up and allow trans shipment of arms to Ukraine. That is perceived by most Americans as a heroic acceptance of risk on behalf of the defense of nonaggression norms and democracy". This is how Julie George (2022) comments on Poland's leadership role in helping Ukraine and Ukrainians: "Poland is becoming a leader in Central and Eastern Europe, certainly a leader in responding to Russian aggression, definitely a leader in protecting Ukrainian refugees and establishing centers for them. The Polish response was swift, immediate, and supportive". She believes, however, that in some time there may be an international discussion about what errors were made and where things went wrong in terms of responding to Russian aggression in Ukraine. Errors always appear, and there's always second guessing, and because Poland was the first to respond, it may be the first to be criticized. Given the importance of helping Ukraine in the US foreign and security policy and the pioneering role that Poland plays in these activities,

its significance in the region has undoubtedly increased. Whether this will continue in the long term, however, will depend on how the war ends and how Poland manages to capitalize politically and economically on the aid provided.

7. CONCLUSION

The Polish authorities are taking steps to consolidate Poland's leading position in the region of Central and Eastern Europe. Considering the economic, political and military potential, Poland has grounds to aspire to such a role. In recent years, the Polish authorities have come up with proposals for regional projects aimed at deepening integration and cooperation in CEE. In order to increase the rank and importance of these projects, they seek support from the United States. The activities of Polish diplomacy are aimed at increasing the importance of CEE in US foreign and security policy, as well as Washington's recognition of Poland's leading role in the region. Various obstacles stood in the way, including the diverse interests of the countries of CEE and their relatively limited economic potential, as well as Poland's problems with respecting liberal democratic principles. However, a new international reality was introduced by the full-scale war in Ukraine. Poland's decisive response in the field of military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine was recognized in the United States. Washington also welcomed Poland's increased responsibility for the security of NATO's eastern flank. So far, during this serious crisis, Poland has shown that it is capable of playing the role of a leader in the region and a serious partner of the United States. For these reasons, the perception of Poland as a potential leader of the region has increased in the USA after the outbreak of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Poland's proving in the long term that it is a competent ally may not only lead to the consolidation of the position of the region's leader in the eyes of the US, but also to a certain shift of US interest from Western Europe to Central and Eastern Europe, especially in the military field. On the other hand, it must be borne in mind that Western European powers have powerful economies, which is important in the context of the US's strategic rivalry with China. For this and other reasons, Poland's ambitions to build a CEE leadership position in opposition to Western European partners is fraught with high risk. It should also be emphasized that much will depend on who will be in power in the USA and Poland.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The article was prepared as part of an internship carried out by the author between April 1st and June 30th 2023 at the Center for International Cooperation and Development Studies (IDC) at the Department of Comparative Governance and European Studies, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest, Romania.

REFERENCES

- Andžāns, M. (2022, 25 May). The Baltic Road to Energy Independence from Russia Is Nearing Completion. *FPRI*. Retrieved from <https://www.fpri.org/article/2022/05/the-baltic-road-to-energy-independence-from-russia-is-nearing-completion/>.
- Banasik, M. (2021). Bucharest Nine in the Process of Strategic Deterrence on Nato's Eastern Flank, *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies*, 1, 27–53. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/CJPS.2021.002>.
- Bergmann, M. (2022, 28 September). Poland and the War in Ukraine: A Conversation with Zbigniew Rau, Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs. *CISIS*. Retrieved from <https://www.csis.org/analysis/poland-and-war-ukraine-conversation-zbigniew-rau-polands-minister-foreign-affairs>.
- Biddle, S. (2022, 5 May). Interview given to the author. Columbia University. New York.
- Bouchet, N. (2015). *Democracy Promotion as US Foreign Policy. Bill Clinton and democratic enlargement*. Routledge.
- Boyes, R. (2023, 15 February). Gung-ho Poland is becoming a military leader in Europe. *The Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/poland-nato-europe-military-power-president-visit-uk-79h52k5zw>.
- Doerer, F. (2018). Historical experiences, strategic culture, and strategic behavior: Poland in the anti-ISIS coalition. *Defence Studies* 18(4), 454-473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2018.1502038>.

- Doyle, M. (2022, 27 April). Interview given to the author. Columbia University. New York.
- Ciński, J. & Toosi, N. (2022, 25 March). Ukraine war turns Poland into America's 'indispensable' ally. *Politico*. Retrieved from <https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-turns-poland-from-pariah-to-indispensable-us-ally/>.
- European Patent Organisation (2023), Patent Index 2022. European patent applications. Retrieved from <https://www.epo.org/about-us/annual-reports-statistics/statistics/2022/statistics/patent-applications.html#tab2>.
- Francis, D. (2023, 28 January). Poland is leading Europe's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. *Atlantic Council*. Retrieved from <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/poland-is-leading-europes-response-to-the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine/>.
- Fryc, M. (2020). The Lithuanian-Polish-Ukrainian Brigade's development potential in the context of regional security. *Scientific Journal of the Military University of Land Forces* 52(1), 5-11. <https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0014.0247>.
- Ganga, P. (2022, 24 May). Interview given to the author. Columbia University. Washington D.C.
- George J. (2022, 23 May). Interview given to the author. Columbia University. New York.
- Global Firepower (2023). 2023 Poland Military Strength. Retrieved from https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=poland.
- Goh, E. & Sahashi, R. (2020). Worldviews on the United States, alliances, and the changing international order: an introduction. *Contemporary Politics*, 26(4), p. 379, 371-383, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777044>.
- Goldgeier, J. (2022, 16 May). Interview given to the author. American University. Washington D.C.
- Jančoškova, V. (2017). Regional cooperation in Central and Eastern Europe and its implications for the EU. *European View*, 16, 231–238. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-017-0460-8>.
- Kowal, P. & Orzelska-Stączek, A. (2019). *Inicjatywa Trójmorza: geneza, cele i funkcjonowanie*. Wydawnictwo Studiów Politycznych PAN.
- Kumar, K. B. (2022, 18 March). For Ukrainian Refugees in Poland, Livelihood Needs Will Follow Humanitarian Ones, Rand Corporation, RAND. Retrieved from <https://www.rand.org/blog/2022/03/for-ukrainian-refugees-in-poland-livelihood-needs-will.html>.
- Lanoszka, A. (2020). Poland in a time of geopolitical flux. *Contemporary Politics*, 26(4), 458-474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777042>.
- Larsen, J. A. (2017). NATO's responses to Russian belligerence: an overview. In K. Friis (Ed), *NATO and Collective Defence in the 21st Century. An Assessment of the Warsaw Summit* (pp. 8-15), Routledge.
- Lebovic, J. H. (2022, 11 May). Interview given to the author. George Washington University. Washington D.C.
- Lewis, S. & Waligórska M. (2019). Introduction: Poland's Wars of Symbols. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 33(2), 423-434, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325418821418>.
- Lietuvos Respublikos Prezidentas (2015, November). Joint Declaration on "Allied Solidarity and Shared Responsibility". Bucharest. Retrieved from <https://www.lrp.lt/data/public/uploads/2015/11/joint-declaration.pdf>.
- Michalik, D. (2019). Współpraca energetyczna w Grupie Wyszehradzkiej – szanse i zagrożenia. In M. Ruszel & S. Podmiotko (Eds), *Bezpieczeństwo energetyczne Polski i Europy. Uwarunkowania – wyzwania – innowacje* (pp. 134–151). Instytut Polityki Energetycznej im. I. Łukasiewicza.
- Miller, M. (2022, 26 April). Interview given to the author. George Washington University, Washington D.C.
- Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine (2020, 28 July). Joint Declaration of Foreign Ministers of the Republic of Poland, the Republic of Lithuania and Ukraine on establishing Lublin Triangle. Lublin. Retrieved from <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news/joint-declaration-foreign-ministers-republic-poland-republic-lithuania-and-ukraine-establishing-lublin-triangle>.
- Moens, A. (2016). *The Foreign Policy of George W. Bush. Values, Strategy, and Loyalty*. Routledge.
- Morawiecki, M. (2022, 23 May). Morawiecki: Poland and the New Architecture of the World Economy [DAVOS 2022], *Forsal.pl*. Retrieved from <https://forsal.pl/gospodarka/aktualnosci/artykuly/8420862,morawiecki-poland-and-the-new-architecture-of-the-world-economy.html>.
- Natras, W. (2023, 20 January). Poland Emerges as Europe's Leader Against Russia's War in Ukraine. *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/poland-emerges-as-europes-leader-against-russias-war-in-ukraine-invasion-support-weapons-tanks-germany-11674248580>.
- Nowak-Jeziorański, J. (2002, 23 November), Cielęcy antyamerykanizm. *Rzeczpospolita*.
- Orzelska-Stączek, A. (2011). *Polityka zagraniczna Polski wobec wybranych kwestii spornych w stosunkach transatlantycznych (1989-2004)*. Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN.
- Pawluszek, T. (2022). *Bezpieczeństwo Polski po szczybie NATO w Madrycie*. Instytut Sobieskiego.
- Snochowska-Gonzalez, C. (2012). Post-colonial Poland—On an Unavoidable Misuse. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 26(4), 708-723. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325412448473>.
- PAP (2010, 13 June). Jarosław Kaczyński: Polska musi być regionalnym liderem. *Jarosław Kaczyński Info*. Retrieved from http://http.jaroslawkaczynski.info/aktualnosci/artykul/a,184,Jaroslaw_Kaczynski_Polska_musi_byc_regionalnym_liderem.html.

- PAP (2022, 12 May). "Poland is becoming the Eastern Europe's leader": US expert. *TVP World*. Retrieved from <https://tvpworld.com/60146300/poland-is-becoming-the-eastern-europes-leader-us-expert>.
- Pifer, S. (2022, 29 April). Interview given to the author. Brookings Institution. Washington D.C.
- President.pl (2018, 18 September). Safeguarding freedom, building prosperity through Poland-US Strategic Partnership. Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.president.pl/news/safeguarding-freedom-building-prosperity-through-poland-us-strategic-partnership.36807>.
- President.pl (2020, 21 January). President: Poland is a leader of growth in Central and Eastern Europe, Retrieved from <https://www.president.pl/news/president-poland-is-a-leader-of-growth-in-central-and-eastern-europe.37098>.
- Reeves, Ch. (2019). From Intervention to Retrenchment: Poland's Strategic Culture and the 2011 Libyan Campaign. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 71(7), 1140-1161, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2019.1627290>.
- Roberts, C. (2022, 13 May). Interview given to the author. Columbia University. New York.
- Sylvan D. & Majeski S. (2009). *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective. Clients, Enemies and Empire*. Routledge.
- U.S. Department of State (2019, 10 June). U.S. Relations With Poland. Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet, Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-poland/>.
- Szeptycki, A. (2021). Poland versus Russia: Competition in Ukraine. *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, 35(4), 1113-1135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0888325420950803>.
- Szklarski, B. & Iłowski, P. (2019). Searching for Solid Ground in Polish-American Relations in the Second Year of the Trump Administration. *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal*, 23(1), 65-82. <https://doi.org/10.18778/1641-4233.23.05>.
- The White House (2006, March). The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2006. *NSS Archive*. Retrieved from <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2006.pdf>.
- The White House (2015, February), The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2015. *NSS Archive*. Retrieved from <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2015.pdf>.
- The White House (2022, October). The National Security Strategy of the United States of America 2022. *NSS Archive*. Retrieved from <https://nssarchive.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Biden-Harris-Administrations-National-Security-Strategy-10.2022.pdf>.
- The White House (2023a, 21 February). Remarks by President Biden Ahead of the One-Year Anniversary of Russia's Brutal and Unprovoked Invasion of Ukraine, Warsaw. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-ahead-of-the-one-year-anniversary-of-russias-brutal-and-unprovoked-invasion-of-ukraine/>.
- The White House (2023b, 21 February). Remarks by President Biden and President Andrzej Duda of Poland After Bilateral Meeting. Warsaw. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/21/remarks-by-president-biden-and-president-andrzej-duda-of-poland-after-bilateral-meeting/>.
- The White House (2023c, 11 April). Remarks by Vice President Harris and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki of Poland Before Bilateral Meeting, Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/04/11/remarks-by-vice-president-harris-and-prime-minister-mateusz-morawiecki-of-poland-before-bilateral-meeting/>.
- The World Bank (2022). GDP (current US\$) – Poland. Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=PL>.
- Three Seas (2016, 25 August). The Joint Statement on the Three Seas Initiative. Dubrovnik. Retrieved from <http://three-seas.eu/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/DUBROVNIK.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of Defense (2022, 29 June). FACT SHEET - U.S. Defense Contributions to Europe, Retrieved from <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3078056/fact-sheet-us-defense-contributions-to-europe/>.
- U.S. Department of State (2008, 20 August). Declaration on Strategic Cooperation Between the United States of America and the Republic of Poland. Washington D.C.. Retrieved from <https://20012009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2008/aug/108661.htm>.
- U.S. Department of State (2020, 15 August). Defense Cooperation Agreement Between the United States of America and Poland. Warsaw. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/20-1113-Poland-EDCA.pdf>.
- U.S. Department of State (2022, 9 December). Secretary Antony J. Blinken And Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau Before Their Meeting. Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-and-polish-foreign-minister-zbigniew-rau-before-their-meeting-2/>.
- U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Poland (2022, 5 March). Secretary Antony J. Blinken and Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau Statements to the Press. Rzeszow. Retrieved from https://pl.usembassy.gov/blinken_rau_statements/.
- U.S. Energy Department (2018, 8 November). Joint Declaration Between the United States Department of Energy and the Ministry of Energy of the Republic of Poland Concerning Enhanced Cooperation on Energy Security. Warsaw. Retrieved from https://www.energy.gov/sites/default/files/pi_icc/098b7ef9801462e5.pdf.

- Waśko-Owsiejczuk, E. (2023). Central and Eastern Europe in U.S. Foreign Policy. In: R. Zięba (Ed.), *Politics and Security of Central and Eastern Europe: Contemporary Challenges*, (pp. 277–295). Springer.
- Wolchik, S. L. (2022, 18 May). Interview given to the author. George Washington University. Washington D.C.
- Wróbel P. J. (2010). Rebuilding Democracy in Poland, 1989–2004. In M. B. Biskupski, J. S. Pula & P. J. Wróbel (Eds), *The Origins of Modern Polish Democracy* (pp. 272-325). Ohio University Press.
- Zdravkovski, A. (2019). Polish Politics, April 1989–October 2015. In S. P. Ramet, K. Ringdal & K. Dośpiał-Borysiak (Eds), *Civic and Uncivic Values in Poland. Value Transformation, Education, and Culture* (pp. 15-40). Central European University Press.
- Zięba, R. (2018). Polityka bezpieczeństwa Polski. In: R. Zięba (Ed.). *Bezpieczeństwo międzynarodowe w XXI wieku* (pp. 445–472). Wydawnictwo Poltext.