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Public opinion on fears and hopes related to Russia and Germany

National stereotypes are a simplification of certain knowledge, and from this point of view they may influence relations between nations and states in a positive or negative way. Poles, like other nations, have a stereotype of “an enemy” and “an ally” deeply imprinted in their collective consciousness. It is a common, simplified and generalised image of other states and their friendly or hostile attitude towards one’s own country.

Poles have some very deeply rooted views on Russia and Germany, resulting from historical experience and a relatively high level of knowledge about the situation in both of the countries. During the transition period, the way in which the Polish public perceived its two most important neighbours, changed significantly. Russia was no longer perceived as an important ally of Poland, and that place had been quickly taken by the western countries, including Germany. It is worth noting that, in spite of the fact that Poland has become deeply integrated into Euroatlantic structures, the fears related to Russia have not only failed to diminish, but have actually become even stronger. However, both Russia and Germany are placed in a closed group of countries with which Poles would like to co-operate in future. This may help to improve the negative image of Russia.

In a study carried out by the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP), first of all, the following question was asked: which countries are perceived by Poles as the allies of Poland and which are the countries they fear¹. Then, the fears were analysed by asking questions related to the main potential threats (political, military and economic), and particular issues raising the greatest concern (e.g. the Baltic gas pipeline). Finally, a question about possible cooperation was asked.

The “Allies” and the “Enemies” of Poland

On the basis of the spontaneous replies given by Poles to an open question about the real allies of Poles, a group of the most important countries may be distinguished. They include: USA (33%), Czech Republic(18%), United Kingdom (18%) and Germany (17%). If these results are compared to earlier studies, it may be noted that between 1990 and 2005 the greatest changes have taken place in the perception of Germany, Russia, Czech Republic (see Table1)².

¹ ISP study “Poland and Germany. Mutual perceptions after Polish accession to the EU” was carried out under the patronage of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in cooperation with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation in November 2005. Detailed data from that study can be found in the Annex at the end of the report.

² See: CBOS, Who can Poland rely on and who should she fear? Study results report, Warsaw, November 2004. In the ISP study of November 2005, the same question was asked as an „open” question, in which the respondents spontaneously listed the countries they considered to be the “allies” or the “enemies” of Poland, without using any list that could prompt their answers. Therefore it seems justified to compare the ISP results with the earlier CBOS results of surveys carried out in 1990, 1992 and 2004, where the nature and the wording of the question asked were identical.

Table 1. The way the allies of Poland are perceived

Having the experience of the past, which countries would you count among the real allies of Poland? (percentage)*	February 1990	May 1992	September 2004	November 2005
United States of America	23	32	26	33
Czech Republic (in 1990 and 1992 Czechoslovakia)	5	5	7	18
United Kingdom	10	9	12	18
Germany	2	7	7	17
France	16	24	7	12
Slovakia (in 1990 and 1992 Czechoslovakia)	-	-	2	6
Hungary	14	9	5	5
Russia/USSR	18	4	2	4
None, Poland has no allies	32	26	25	15
Difficult to say	10	15	24	16

Source: Data from 1990, 1992, 2004 – CBOS, 2005 – ISP.

* In descending order, according to 2005 data

For many years the image of the United States as a real ally of Poland has seemed unquestionable. Public support has remained at a similar level: 23% (1990) and currently 33% (2005). Since the beginning of transition in 1989, Poles have seen the alliance with the USA as a guarantee of their security. In spite of the lack of support for the war in Iraq, which is an important project implemented in alliance with the USA, the Polish society supports the alliance with the USA. The demands to withdraw the Polish troops from Iraq, expressed by the Polish public, do not result in the change of the image of USA as our ally.

As far as other countries are concerned, it is possible to notice significant fluctuations of the public opinion over the last fifteen years. The greatest change

has been noted in relation to Germany, which in 1990 was pointed to as a real ally of Poland only by 2% of respondents, and in 2005 by as many as 17%. Such a positive result seems to be an effect of a consistent and active role played by Germany in promoting Polish membership in the EU. In spite of historical prejudice, Poles seem to notice a number of benefits of a sustainable and long-term alliance with Germany³.

A similarly significant change between the 1990 and 2005 can be noticed in the perception of the Czech. It is worth noting that the survey was carried out before the official visit to Prague of the Polish President Lech Kaczyński. Poles seem to appreciate the efforts of their southern neighbour to carry out reforms and free market transformation, and seem to count on positive results of cooperation within the EU. That would explain the increase between the beginning of the transformation (5%) and the year 2005 (18%). A reverse trend has been noted in case of Hungary, which can be explained by a generation change and the gradual disappearance of the older generation of Poles who remembered the period between the world wars and the events of 1956, but also by a limited activity of Hungary on the international stage⁴.

A similar decrease can be noted in case of Russia – the direct successor of the Soviet Union. After the disintegration of the communist block, it became evident how unpopular with the public was the People' Republic propaganda of the close Polish-Soviet friendship. In 1990 18% of the respondents perceived the Soviet Union as a real ally of Poland. In the following years such a view of Russia was held by 2% to 4%. As it can be seen, Poles did not perceive the „Big Brother” as a hope for future and a true alliance partner. A number of studies show that the times when the communist block existed have been perceived as the era of Soviet

³ See M. Falkowski, Meinungen der Polen über die polnisch-deutschen Beziehungen nach dem Regierungswechsel in beiden Ländern, Eine Meinungsfrage des ISP, December 2005, (www.isp.org.pl).

⁴ See L. Kolarska-Bobinska, J. Kucharczyk, P. Kaczynski (ed.) Bridges across the Atlantic? Attitudes of Poles, Czechs and Slovaks towards the United States, Warsaw 2005, p. 37.

domination and abuse of Poland⁵. Since early 1990s Poles have started to place their hopes in the NATO, EU and other Member States.

The results of surveys examining the attitude of the public towards countries perceived as a potential threat, lead to important conclusions. As in the previous question, the spontaneous replies indicate some interesting changes and trends in the public perception over the last sixteen years (See Table 2).

Table 2. Perception of countries posing a threat to Poland

What are the countries Poland should fear most? (percentage)*	II 1990	V 1992	IX 2004	XI 2005
Russia/USSR	25	45	44	67
Germany	88	58	35	21
Belarus	-	3	5	12
Iraq, "Arab countries", "Muslim, Islamic countries", "countries where terrorism is widespread"	0	1	18	8
Ukraine	3	30	5	7
United States of America	2	2	5	5
None, Poland has no enemies	3	5	6	5
Difficult to say	3	8	12	10

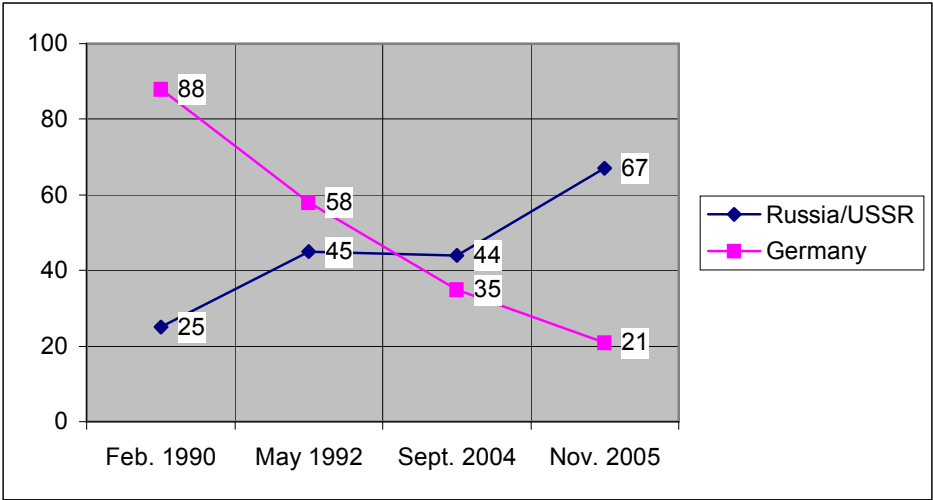
Source: Data from 1990, 1992, 2004 – CBOS, 2005 – ISP.

* In descending order, according to 2005 data.

⁵ See A. Skorupska, Polska opinia publiczna o Rosji i Rosjanach [in] A. de Lazari (ed.) Polacy i Rosjanie – przewyciężanie uprzedzeń, Łódź 2006.

At the beginning of 1990s, the countries that Poles feared most included Germany (88%), 25% pointed to the Soviet Union. Other countries did not raise any serious concern. After fifteen years, the situation has reversed. In a survey of November 2005 as many as 67% of respondents saw Russia as the greatest threat, while only 21% pointed to Germany. Never before have so many fears been expressed in relation to Russia as it is the case now, in 2005. This is not a good indicator for the development of Polish-Russian relations. If we look at the replies from different years, it can be easily seen that the growth of fears of Russia has been accompanied by the decrease in such attitudes towards Germany (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1.
 Russia and Germany as countries which Poland should fear most (1990-2005)
 (in %)



Source: Data from 1990, 1992, 2004 – CBOS; from 2005 – ISP.

The fear of Germany reflected in the results of a survey in 1990 had been the result of the war experience and the nearly fifty years of indoctrination by the communist authorities, who kept talking about possible revisionism and imperialist threat posed by that country. The prospect of a united and strong Germany raised,

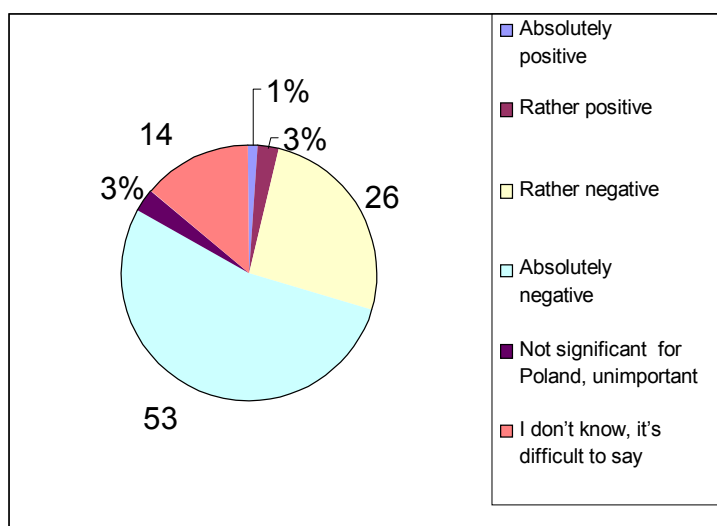
therefore, serious concern in the Polish society. The peaceful attitude of Germany and its support for democratic changes in Poland convinced the Poles that they had nothing to fear from their western neighbour. The decrease in fears was noticeable already after two years (58% in 1992). The German active support for Polish accession to the EU, in spite of contentious issues in the Polish-German dialogue, reappearing from time to time and dominating the public debate, have shown the Polish society that Germany may become the main ally and partner of Poland in the EU. The generally good cooperation, which from time to time stumbled on certain obstacles, has had a positive impact on further reduction of the sense of threat from 35% in 2004 to 21% in 2005.

Unlike in the case of Germany, the Polish fears of the Soviet Union and Russia have been gradually growing, in spite of the fact that Poland has been deeply rooted in the Euroatlantic structures. It may be the case that the foundations of those fears over the last fifteen years have been different. In the early 1990s, a potential threat had been the political instability and the lack of certainty where the new Russia was going, the growing Mafia structures and a threat of mass migration. Since mid 1990s the sustained level of fears has been indicated, regarding Russia, which has not been a fully democratic country and whose neo-imperialism Poles have seemed to fear. Today the threat that Poles see in Russia is connected with her growing strength on the international stage, mainly thanks to the great energy resources and the military potential (including the nuclear capacity). The picture of Russia recovering her influence in Central and Eastern Europe, seems to Poles to be more and more likely. The high level of fears, over 67%, is also the reason why it is worth asking Poles whether they do believe in pacts and alliances with the western countries.

The sensitive issues in Polish-German-Russian relations

The growing sense of threat related to Russia (from 44% in 2004 to 67% in 2005), has been caused not just by the events from a few months ago, that is the hooligan excesses in Warsaw and Moscow or the Russian ban on some food imports from Poland. The Polish society can see the strength of Russia and the potential threat it may pose, mainly in the area of energy security. The Poles realise that when the trade in strategic resources is concerned, there may be no room for EU solidarity. According to them, the best evidence of that is the position of the German government standing firmly by the Baltic gas pipe project. Over 80% of those polled believe that the talks and the agreements between Germany and Russia concerning the construction of that gas pipe, held without the participation of Poland, should receive a negative assessment. (See Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. What, from the Polish point of view, should be the assessment of the talks and agreements between Germany and Russia concerning the Baltic gas pipeline, held without the participation of Poland?



Source: ISP

In spite of the fact that Poland is present in the NATO and UE structures and that the level of trust towards Germany is on the rise, Poles seem to fear that the “demons of the past may be awakened”. When asked whether the closer relations between Germany and Russia pose a threat to Poland, nearly 61% replied “yes” and over 27% – “no”. Such a result may be explained in two ways: in the economic and in the historical dimension. The first one suggests that Poles are afraid of economic losses resulting from such an agreement, e.g. taking away the intermediary role from Polish companies, or loss of some of the markets. The other shows that Poles, in spite of the fact that the international situation has dramatically changed, are still concerned that the painful history may repeat itself – they are afraid of losing their independence. It may be the case that the internal crises, first in the NATO (the dispute over the intervention in Iraq) and then in the European Union (the constitution crisis after the “No” vote in the referenda in France and the Netherlands) make the Poles believe that both organisations are not very stable and that national interests take priority. And those interests, in case of Russia and Germany, have often meant subjugating their closest neighbours, including Poland. Those results can be briefly summarised as: “nothing about us, without us”.

Future image of Germany and Russia

For many Poles, Russia may in future constitute both a military threat (67%), an economic threat (62%) and a political one (63%). The fact that there are slightly more people afraid of the military threat than the economic and the political ones, shows that the rebirth of the Russian military power is stronger perceived in Poland than the rebirth of its economic capacity and its political rank. (See Table 3).

Table 3. Areas of potential threats from Germany and Russia

Are you afraid that in future Russia/Germany may pose a threat to Poland: (percentage)	military		economic		political	
	Russia	Germany	Russia	Germany	Russia	Germany
Yes	67	29	62	49	63	33
No	24	60	29	39	23	50
Difficult to say	9	11	9	11	14	16

Source: ISP

Germany does not raise such strong concerns as Russia. Only when asked about economic issues, nearly half of the respondents pointed to a possible German threat. Poles can clearly see the economic potential of Germany, which the Polish companies and the Polish capital have no chance to compete with.

Bearing in mind the above survey results, it does not seem easy to improve the way in which Russia is perceived by the Polish public. However, when asked about future cooperation, the respondents surprisingly often pointed to Russia as a country with which Poland should cooperate most closely (See Table 4). That means that there is certain potential which can play a role in improving the way Poles perceive Russia.

Table 4. Suggested cooperation of Poland with other countries

In your opinion, which countries should Poland cooperate with most closely? (percentage)*	economically	politically	militarily
Germany	37	32	21
Russia	33	18	11
United States of America	32	43	64
United Kingdom	23	29	34
Ukraine	14	7	3
Czech Republic	12	8	3
France	10	13	8
Japan	9	2	2
Lithuania	4	3	1
Slovakia	3	4	2
Difficult to say	8	15	16

* Respondents selected not more than two countries from the list, results in descending order according to data from the first column

Source: Data from ISP

From the list of ten countries, the respondents most often pointed to USA, United Kingdom, Germany and Russia as countries with which Poland should cooperate in the economic, political and military spheres. As regards economy, Poland should first of all cooperate with Germany (37%), and as regards political and military issues – with USA (43% and 64% respectively). A significant percentage of respondents also suggested the United Kingdom in all of the areas of cooperation (22%, 29% and 34%).

The second most often suggested country for economic cooperation was Russia (33%) – in this category selected more often than USA or United Kingdom. The high percentage of such replies can be explained by the openness of the Polish society to trade with Russia, mainly among farmers and people having their own

businesses, who can see a lot of potential benefits and a big chance of achieving them. It is probable that a great number of those who supported economic cooperation with Russia came from the border regions in the east of Poland – for them the matter of trade with Russia seems to be a key issue – yet, on the national scale that percentage cannot be so high.

The common belief that economic cooperation with Russia is necessary, indicates that Polish public is very pragmatic and that it perceives Russia as a big, ready and easy market. In spite of the numerous differences between Poland and Russia: different interpretation of history or contradictory geo-political interests, the Poles want to cooperate with the Russians. Such a positive attitude of the public, only in one sphere – the economy, may in future, with the appropriate contribution on the part of politicians, affect the overall perception of Russia. Another very important signal from the public is the willingness to cooperate with the Germans not only economically but also politically. In view of the current crisis within the EU, this seems to be an important message for the Polish government.

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The survey has been carried out within the framework of the project “Poland and Germany. Mutual perceptions after the Polish accession to the European Union”. It was carried out by CBOS between 25 and 28 November 2005, on a randomly selected sample of 1005 people over 18 years of age.

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