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**PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY
OF THE STATE.
ANALYSIS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE
OF POLISH FOREIGN POLICY**

Keywords: foreign affairs, public opinion, international relations

ABSTRACT: For the purposes of this article it has been assumed that public opinion is a rapidly changing state of consciousness of large social groups, made up of more or less stable ideas and beliefs, relating to debatable issues, which has a direct or indirect impact on the current or future interests of society by its properties. This article aims to analyze the impact of public opinion on Polish foreign policy after 1989. The article assumes that: the public opinion has an impact on decisions affecting foreign policy, although the extent of this impact is very different and often is purely indirect; impact of public opinion in Poland on foreign policy increases, but still shall be defined only as incidental impact; public opinion in Poland does not determine foreign policy.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to analyze the impact of public opinion on Polish foreign policy after 1989. In this context of key importance becomes the question of whether policymakers must or at least should take into consideration public opinion on foreign policy issues, or may completely ignore preferences of the public. Although the democratic system is based

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on the belief that citizens shall be provided with opportunities to influence the foreign policy, it must be clarified whether policymakers take into account the preferences of public opinion in this matter. The question remains whether the public stimulates action taken by the government and how the public can affect the government and articulate its position.

The article assumes that:

1. The public opinion has an impact on decisions affecting foreign policy, although the extent of this impact is very different and often is purely indirect;
2. Impact of public opinion in Poland on foreign policy increases, but still shall be defined only as incidental impact;
3. Public opinion in Poland does not determine foreign policy.

2. THE MAIN THEORETICAL FINDINGS

For the purposes of this article it has been assumed that public opinion is a rapidly changing state of consciousness of large social groups, made up of more or less stable ideas and beliefs, relating to debatable issues, which has a direct or indirect impact on the current or future interests of society by its properties (lability, transitoriness, dynamism) (Młyniec, 1996). It is a form of social consciousness of large social groups, which are able to develop their own opinion, independent or different approach in relation to the opinions promoted by the government. Public opinion may be expressed by individuals, whose judgment is important because of the authority they have, all kinds of social groups, religious communities, professional groups, social organizations and associations (Sokół, Żmigrodzki, 1999, p. 207).

Taking into account the specific characteristics of the public opinion such as significance, distribution, ephemerality and susceptibility to manipulation by the government it should be noted that it is characteristic for the democratic system, which involves e.g. social participation, civic activity, political pluralism, freedom of speech and belief and, above all, it guarantees free public articulation of attitudes and beliefs (Jabłoński, 2004, pp. 481–482). For the purposes of this article it has been assumed that

public opinion means generally accepted views, beliefs, attitudes that are expressed in important issues, which are often sensitive and debatable (Lepa, pp. 90–91). Public opinion is the position towards social, political, economic, cultural, civilizational issues causing interest due to their repercussions for society (Ziółkowski, 2012).

Foreign policy is a concept identified with the activities of the State in relation to other countries (regions) and international organizations in order to meet the specific needs and interests pursued by the competent authorities and institutions (Podgórzeńska, 2013, pp. 82–83). The definition of that category of policy emphasizes different aspects, which fall within certain scientific trends highlighting – important to them – methods for explaining activity of the State towards the external environment, the objectives that it wants to achieve, factors that identify and determine its character, as well as relations with others participants in international affairs. According to Derek Beach, the most important should not be to debate about how we should define foreign policy, as any notion has its advantages and disadvantages. It is important, however, to be aware of these restrictions and conduct research. The context of the research will weigh on whether there is the need to use a broader or narrower interpretation. More broadly, foreign policy means behaviors and actions taken by the state or other entity of public life, directed towards others collective entities within the international system (Beach, 2012). In this regard, foreign policy is generally the policy of a country towards the outside environment and interaction with this environment (Breuning, 2007, p. 5).

Throughout the years in the literature of the subject the main discourse between researchers referred to whether public opinion mattered in political process, and in consequence in what way, and how much it influenced political decisions made by politicians. Scientific approach to the role of public opinion in the foreign policy-making process has been evolving for years. It needs to be underlined that in the approach referring to the analysis of the impact of public opinion on foreign policies there are two opposite dominating positions– two schools of thought on the role of public opinion in the process of creating foreign policies. The first of them roots from belief that public opinion is not significant in understanding processes associated with the formation and implementation of

foreign policy. For years the mainstream research approach of realism promoted a conviction that public opinion has little impact on foreign policy because its main determinants are the external, not internal factors. The realists viewed the public opinion as an element of the domestic aspect of the foreign policy; however they were very skeptical about its contribution to effective foreign policy. It was noticed that citizens can be interested in national affairs, which affect their daily life, while foreign affairs are too distant to be well-known. The researchers decided on the fact that society has little inclination towards increasing their awareness of foreign affairs. In the realistic approach the state is the main actor in foreign policy and its efficacy depends on actions taken by politicians. The public is of little importance; it is ignored or at most slightly taken into account by politicians, who make political decisions guided by their way of understanding the national interest and having full knowledge of the intricacies of international politics. The dominating conviction is that public opinion is not oriented in the subject of foreign policy. This stems largely from the nature of foreign policy, which in order to increase the effectiveness, requires confidentiality in the process of implementation and being well-oriented in international affairs; and the public obviously is not. Furthermore, it was substantiated that the public is emotional and capable of sudden reactions. It uses simplifications, schematics, absolutises categories such as good and bad. According to Hans Morgenthau, rational requirements of good policy cannot be focused from the beginning on the support of the public, the preferences of which are more emotional than rational (Morganthau, 2010, p. 169). Similarly, George F. Kennan argued that public opinion can be easily directed to the areas of emotionalism and subjectivism, which makes it a wrong guide for actions of the state (Kennan, 1951).

Politicians need to think in terms of national interest, weighing decisions, making choices, and ability to wait for and make compromises. The public expects results immediately and, as noticed by H. Morganthau, it is willing to sacrifice future benefits in order to obtain the apparent advantages and therefore it should be kept away from foreign policy. When recognizing the dilemma of the government in a democratic system involving the need to oscillate between a desire to lead a good policy

without taking into account the public opinion, or to lead a bad policy taking into account its requirements, he argued that the government leading foreign policy shall avoid both of these approaches (Morgenthau, 2010, p. 171). On the one hand, it must take into account public opinion and in this respect it constitutes a restriction for political action. On the other hand, he stressed that the views and arguments presented by public opinion must not inhibit political activities (Maj, 1999, p. 207). At the same time, however, the government must recognize that there is an inherent conflict between the requirements of good foreign policy and preferences of the public, which cannot be solved but only reduced (Morgenthau, 2010, p. 172). While the public occasionally impacts foreign policy and sometimes causes difficulties for policy-makers, realists conclude that the elite either leads to the situation in which public opinion supports their actions or ignores its preferences.

At this point, the analysis can be complemented with neo-realistic perspective that considers the state as selfish actor trying to survive in the anarchy, which is full of problems. Everything else can be considered negligible compared to that imperative. For example, John Mearsheimer found that when it comes to issues of national security, the public changes its opinion notoriously and is manipulated by elite and world events. As he noted, the dialogue on foreign policy in the US is often made in the language of liberalism, despite the fact that behind closed doors the US operates in the international system according to what is dictated by logic of realism. In fact, there is a noticeable gap separating the public rhetoric from the actual method of leading American foreign policy (Mearsheimer, 2002). At the same time, taking into account the diversity and fragmentation of the current neo-realistic trend there can be indicated theses that deny assumption about the irrelevance of the public. An example is the theorem made by Fareed Zakaria that these are internal factors (interests, mood of the public) that create the foreign policy of the state (which is the basic assumption of neoliberalism) (Zakaria, 2002).

The second approach that originates from liberalism rooted in the belief that internal factors create foreign policy puts much greater emphasis on the role of public opinion, which is not, however, of crucial matter when taking political decisions, but it is important and taken into account.

In contrast to realism, liberalism appreciates the importance of national policy in foreign policy. As noted by Vinsensio Dugis, instead of seeing the state as a unitary rational actor this approach sees it as a coalition representing the interests of individuals, various groups of individuals and society. This author emphasizes that in the tradition of liberalism the prevailing view is the importance and the constructive nature of the impact of society on foreign policy (Dugis, 2009).

Supporters of recognition of the role of public opinion in the creation of foreign policy call for a kind of “socialization” of foreign policy. This approach emphasizes the ability of governments to lead foreign policy independently, but also points to the necessity for mobilizing the public opinion by actively promoting specific decisions made in this matter. Liberal approach suggests that public opinion is stable in international affairs as well as reasonable and rational, consistent, and that there is an interaction between public opinion and foreign policy. The public acts as a factor limiting the governing and indirectly affects the creation of foreign policy in which decision-makers consciously develop it by taking into consideration what is and what is not acceptable for the public. Therefore, government decisions are influenced by a kind of constraint on the part of the public, which by accepting or objecting to specific outcomes decides on the action taken. This observation can also be found in the objectives of neoliberals, which stress that the state is no longer a unitary entity and that other non-governmental parties also influence decision-making in foreign policy. As noted by V. Dugis, governments must take into account the potential reaction of the public to their decisions. And although liberalism generally agrees with the view that national policy plays a role in foreign policy, however, there are differences between the supporters as to how it is important and how national policy influences this process (Dugis, 2009).

It should be noted that declarations about the need to strengthen the role of public opinion and the need for a broader public debate on fundamental questions of foreign policy in Poland are not reflected in the political practice. The recognized need to take into account the social context remains rhetoric. Ryszard Zięba even explicitly formulated a complaint about the lack of socialization of the process of formulating the

foreign policy objectives in the democratic system, which was reflected in non-consulted concept of foreign policy with the society. This researcher stressed that it was done not only at the beginning of the transformation process, but also later, when the decisions of strategic importance were taken (Zięba, 2007, p. 388–389).

In conclusion, attitudes towards the issue of public opinion and its impact on foreign policy seem contradictory. In part, this is due to the difficulty of identifying the actual impact – researchers cannot look into the minds of decision-makers and see what affects their work. Moreover, it is technically difficult for researchers to isolate a single factor, such as the public opinion, from a number of other diverse factors influencing the decision-makers. The question to be answered is how exactly the attitudes and opinions of citizens influence decision-making process in foreign policy. As proposed by Risse-Kappen, there can be taken two general perspectives in explaining the interaction between public opinion and decision-makers in the decision-making process in foreign policy. The first approach – *bottom-up* – implies that the public has a significant impact on the process of decision-making in foreign policy – decision-makers follow public opinion. The second approach – *top-down* – provides that public opinion is easily manipulated by political leaders, because, firstly, the affairs of foreign policy and security are of minor importance compared to e.g. the economic policy; secondly, the public has poor knowledge about these affairs; and, thirdly, the public is unpredictable and dynamically changes its opinion (Risse-Kappen, 1991).

Taking as a leading approach that the public opinion has an impact on foreign policy, it should be stressed that in a democratic system, political authority should be sensitive to the signals coming from the public. In other words, it is expected that the opinions of citizens living in a democratic state will be reflected in government policy, including foreign policy. In a democratic country the authorities elected by the public are restricted and inhibited by the people. Leading foreign policy and fulfilling its democratic mandate the government is forced to explain its decisions and mobilize the public. Its decisions, the way of governing, the instruments used both in the context of internal and external policies are subject to periodic verification. This does not mean resignation or deprivation of the state from the role of

the entity leading foreign policy, but it means to enable the public to influence foreign policy through democratic procedures.

Foreign policy should be accepted by the public and decisions of politicians should be understood and supported by at least a significant part of the citizens. They must understand the intentions of authority and approve them. Foreign policy cannot be led in isolation from the real needs and expectations of society. Public reaction to certain actions, signals approving or disapproving the actions of the government cannot be and are not ignored today. The public can therefore play a constructive, limiting and inhibiting role.

3. THE NATURE AND CONDITIONS OF THE IMPACT OF PUBLIC OPINION ON FOREIGN POLICY IN POLAND

Consciously avoiding a broader analysis of Polish foreign policy, its objectives, the nature and circumstances one can accept the notion of a possible though incidental impact of public opinion on foreign policy implemented in the new reality after 1989. The basic thesis is that because of the multiplicity of restrictions accompanying the foreign policy creation process, public opinion is not the decisive factor. The impact public opinion has on politics is limited, not least because of the multiplicity of factors that influence the decision-makers, and it is difficult to reliably tell which ones are decisive and whether public opinion is one of them. It works at most as a factor limiting the government and indirectly affecting the creation of foreign policy in which decision-makers consciously develop a foreign policy taking into consideration what public accepts and what it does not accept. On the other hand, when conducting foreign policy and implementing its democratic mandate the government, taking into consideration the complexity of this sphere of its actions, is forced to explain its decisions and mobilize society. Aside from the fact that to be effective foreign policy must be conducted in a certain way, often while maintaining confidentiality, it does not have to mean that it is the behind the scenes activity of decision-makers, unlimited secret game about the effects of which the public is only informed. Indeed it is that the rulers, who have

full knowledge of the intricacies of international reality, make the decisions they deem consistent with the national interest, while the public has a deficit of knowledge in this regard. Sometimes, however, the will of society may decide about particular actions taken in this field. It is essential in the said moments for the society to contain reliable knowledge in order to influence crucial decisions. Understanding of the international processes and phenomena, their consequences for state's policy, aftermaths of abandoning or taking specific action, will bring benefits both for the state and its citizens in the longer term.

When analysing the impact of public opinion on foreign policy in Poland after 1989 one should pay attention to several factors that determine the strength of its impact. Firstly, foreign policy was subjected to process of fundamental redefinition, which took place parallel to the profound social, political and economic changes. As a result, public opinion was in the initial period of the transformation absorbed in matters of internal rather than external policy. Increased interest in international issues was related to the development of the international situation and the potential threats to the security of Poland. Secondly, for a long time the society's knowledge about the problematic of foreign policy was relatively poor as confirmed by public opinion polls (Karpowicz, Osieck, 1996). However, it is worth mentioning, that the lack of knowledge did not mean that the Poles had no idea about the international situation, Poland's role or its position in the world. However, they formulated them basing on diverse signals, shreds of information, detached stimulus, and what's significant – on stereotypes. At the beginning of the transformation, foreign policy and the broadly defined international affairs remained on the margins of public interest. Only with time this knowledge improved due to intensification of government's information strategy and the emergence of various types of entities (e.g. NGOs). Thirdly, the increase of public interest in foreign policy issues in Poland remained and still remains closely connected to the quality of public debate and deliberate "introduction" of foreign policy to political discourse. Not rarely the current political interest uses foreign policy for own political purposes, which is reflected in the social attitude, increase or decrease of acceptance for the decisions made by the government, as well as the increase or decrease

in support for the opposition. And while mobilizing oneself is not something negative, on the contrary, it could be considered as a sign of political culture, in Poland it exhibits all the negative qualities of politicisation. Fourthly, the polls showed that public opinion in Poland increasingly recognizes that the fate of Poland, its role on the international stage is determined by independent of us “international situation” that we have no influence on. The minority claimed that the fate of Poland depends on the Polish foreign policy (Karpowicz, Osieck, 1996). This scepticism referring to the subjectivity of Poland on the international arena preserved during the years, independently from any modification of its position in that area. Fifthly, as practise shows decisions regarding foreign policy were made arbitrarily by the governments and the public was informed about the final outcome. The public did not question decisions that had been taken due to established compromise, which consisted of general consent of most active political environments regarding foreign policy’s main objectives, directions and priorities. With few exceptions concerning methods, means and style of practicing foreign policy, established paradigm of new form of external relations was not questioned for a long time. An example of this is the issue of Polish involvement in military actions and participation of soldiers in the international community ventures abroad. Whenever involvement in a war came into play, and in particular threat to life of Polish soldiers, position of rulers and public opinion were in opposition to each other. At the same time sending troops abroad indicated the absence of impact of public opinion on the decisions taken by the government. Decision-making procedure excludes the public from decision making process and their approval or disapproval can only be displayed by using the mechanisms of democracy. It was proven by anti-war demonstrations in Poland and many voices criticizing the decisions taken. Earlier, a similar situation occurred when Poland supported NATO action in Kosovo in 1999. It is worth mentioning that the support for sending Polish troops in areas of conflict was never significant. Relatively the greatest support the public shows for actions within the UN framework, less for missions organized by NATO or the EU, while the minimum support Polish citizens show for the actions not organized by any international organization (Lasoń, 2010).

There are many important and distinct examples when governments ignored public opinion on foreign policy issues that might prove that public does not have impact on decisions concerning the foreign policy. For example, in the period before the invasion in Iraq, opinion polls regularly showed that public opinion was divided on the war, and yet it has been decided to participate in the invasion. Similarly, the reluctance of the public to military involvement in Afghanistan did not influence the resignation of Poland in participation in the Alliance's mission.

A noteworthy situation is the decision to withdraw Polish troops from Afghanistan. When justifying the decision to the Sejm in November 2007, Prime Minister Donald Tusk claimed that he takes this decision knowing how it is important for Poles and Polish public opinion. Therefore, it can be assumed that on the one hand it was dictated by the expectations of public opinion; on the other hand, it was a consequence of a previous election campaign. The pressure of public opinion was one of the factors that influenced the decision to withdraw the troops, but not the only and not conclusive one.

At the same time, however, as evidenced by Polish military involvement abroad, in the first instance government decisions were made in the context of internal policy rather than foreign policy. In the Polish case foreign policy issues did not influence the approval or disapproval made by political leaders and were not a kind of "punishment" in the election as it was the case of Great Britain and Tony Blair. In the Polish reality an example of Leszek Miller shall be mentioned. After the resignation of the government only 3% of respondents mentioned sending Polish troops to Iraq as that government's biggest faults, while at the same time the vast majority opposed the Polish participation in this military operation.

The visible strength of public opinion was revealed in early 2012 when Poland and 21 other EU member states signed an international Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA). After the criticism and protests some countries, including Poland, suspended the ratification of the document. This example (although isolated) confirms that the government withdrew from previous decisions under the influence of mass criticism and concerns about the public support.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion it should be noted that the impact of public opinion in Poland on foreign policy is limited. It works at most as an inhibitor to the government and has an indirect impact on creating foreign policy in which decision-makers consciously develop a foreign policy knowing what public opinion accepts and what it does not accept. However, they are rarely guided by the perception of the public. Public opinion in Poland is sensitized and focused mainly on matters of national policy, not foreign one. Approval or disapproval of that part of the government's activity is only one component that determines the final assessment of the government, but not decisive one.

It is worth noting that there is a kind of ignoring public opinion by the government, through inadequate information on foreign policy issues (Bodnar, Pacho, 2012). deliberate omission of specific problems and no quality debate. As noted by Stanislaw Lem, there are almost no substantive polemics in our country (Lem, 2005). Whether we are talking about daily, elite, institutional or media discourse, it is politicized, marked by stereotypes and simplifications.

The impact of public opinion on foreign policy is difficult to identify. It should be remembered that the decision-making process is conditioned by a number of factors. Public opinion is only one of them, not always the most important one.

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