



Polish Public Opinion on the United States Missile Defense Complex in Poland

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Abstract

The ongoing cooperation between the United States and Poland on ballistic missile defense has been centered for a long time solely around the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo, Poland. Although the complex is going to operate as an element of the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense System, its origins were tied to bilateral security and defense cooperation between the U.S. and Poland. As the presence of the U.S. military forces in Poland will remain crucial for Polish security and defense, and the societal support will be vital for its sustainment, it is worth exploring how Polish society reacted to concepts and plans for fielding the U.S. missile defense complex several years ago.

The aim of this article was to explore the evolution of societal support and public opinion in Poland related to the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo, Poland. The following research problem was posed: how has Polish public opinion about the missile defense complex construction changed over time? The research relied on methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis, and the primary research technique was the analysis of public opinion polls in Poland between 2004 and 2019. Public opinion has remained interested in the developments related to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland since early negotiations to the project implementation phase. The project was seen in a broader context of security and defense cooperation with the U.S. and within the NATO.

Keywords

air defense, missile defense complex, Poland, public opinion, U.S. missile defense.

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1. Introduction

The idea of creating a missile defense system to protect the United States against missile attacks from so called “rouge states” was authored by the President George W. Bush, who announced the plans for construction of a part of the American missile defense system in the Central and Eastern Europe. The system was quickly dubbed the “anti-missile shield” in Poland, and was considered proof of the U.S. support for Polish security and defense. However; the next U.S. President Barack Obama, scaled down his predecessor’s plans of work on the missile defense, which dissatisfied the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. After negotiations, instead of the system planned by the G. W. Bush administration, which opted for longer range and larger missiles, President Obama decided on a clearly smaller and “weaker” variant of the system (Zolotukhina, 2010). The issue of missile defense has undergone a significant evolution both in the bilateral cooperation between the United States and Poland, and within NATO. However, for almost a decade it was an important element of the bilateral cooperation on ballistic missile defense that had been focused on the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo, Poland.

The concept of hosting the U.S. missile defense system in Poland has sparked a heated debate among Polish political elites, and has influenced public opinion in Poland for almost fifteen years. A number of arguments were raised and contrary political views clashed frequently. While some tangible plans of constructing the U.S. ballistic missile complex in Poland can be traced back to 2007, Polish society has been aware of this issue since 2005 and first public opinion polls were conducted at that time. Polish political elites were concerned about public opinion reactions to the project at that time. It was widely understood in Poland that societal support would be necessary for the implementation of such an important military project, and it would be essential for making final political and military decisions. The topic is worth researching not only for the sake of recording historic developments related to the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo. At least some of the observations on the factors influencing public opinion and dynamics of societal support to the missile defense complex may be relevant to current situation. The development of strategic partnership in the field of security and defense between the United States and Poland remains in the center of public interest in Poland and influences results of public opinion polls, which are taken into consideration in political decisions by Polish government. Therefore, it makes sense to have a closer look at factors that influenced public opinion in Poland on hosting the U.S. missile defense complex and explore the dynamics of societal support for security and defense cooperation between the U.S. and Poland in recent decades.

The aim of this article was to explore evolution of societal support and public opinion in Poland related to the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo. The article tries to answer the following research question: how has Polish public opinion about the missile defense complex construction changed over time? The research has relied on the methods of qualitative and quantitative analysis, and the primary research technique was the analysis of public opinion polls in Poland. Publicly available results, summaries and analyses of the public opinion polls conducted between 2004 and 2019 were the primary sources of information used in the research. As the methodology of all public opinion polls analyzed for the purpose of the article was the same, it allowed for the identification of long term trends related to specific aspects of public support for the U.S. missile defense complex. It was also crucial for further discussion of linkages between public support and political decisions by the Polish government on hosting the U.S. missile defense complex. This article

starts with a brief discussion on the background and context of hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland as an introduction to a more detailed discussion of changes in the Public opinion attitudes in consecutive years.

2. The U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. Background and context

The U.S. government started talks with Poland over the possibility of hosting the elements of a missile defense system capable of intercepting long-range ballistic missiles in 2002. The United States missile defense complex in Poland, also called the European Interceptor Site, was intended to contain ten ground-based interceptors with exoatmospheric kill vehicles. The complex was to be located in Redzikowo and constitute an element of the European segment of the ground-based midcourse defense, along with a radar system located in the Czech Republic. In February 2007, the United States started formal negotiations with Poland and the Czech Republic concerning construction of missile shield installations in those countries for a Ground-Based Midcourse Defense System. In July 2008, Poland did not accept initial offers by the United States regarding the deployment of antiballistic missiles on its territory. However, on August 20, 2008, the "Agreement Between the Government of the United States of America and the Government of the Republic of Poland Concerning the Deployment of Ground-Based Ballistic Missile Defense Interceptors in the Territory of the Republic of Poland" was concluded. The project was strongly opposed by Russia, which threatened Poland and NATO with deployment of nuclear capable missiles in Kaliningrad District to neutralize the elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Redzikowo. The U.S. commitment to the project changed just a few months later, when President Barack Obama took office. In April 2009, during a speech in Prague, he declared the continuation of the missile defense program, but with a missile defense system that was cost-effective and proven. On September 17, 2009, the US government decided that it "no longer planned to move forward" with the original program and a proposed a scaled-down project in October 2009. The new plan for the US European Phased Adaptive Approach (EPAA) called for a combination of maritime and land-based elements of AEGIS system and was based on SM-3 interceptors (Arms Control Association, 2021).

U.S. missile defense efforts were developed in parallel to NATO concepts and efforts. The Alliance started feasibility studies for a future Alliance Theatre Ballistic Missile Defense system in May 2001. In 2002, a missile defense feasibility study was launched to examine options for protecting Alliance forces, territory and populations against the full range of ballistic missile threats. In April 2006 a territorial ballistic missile defense capability was declared by NATO as technically feasible. Moreover, in April 2008, NATO leaders agreed that European-based elements of the future U.S. ballistic missile system should be integrated with any future NATO-wide missile defense architecture. At the Lisbon Summit in 2010, NATO decided to develop a ballistic missile defense capability for collective defense. As the Alliance decided to expand the scope of its missile defense from protecting forces to protecting NATO European populations and territory, the U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach, along with other national contributions, were welcomed (Roslan, 2018). NATO decisions set the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo in a different strategic context as the installation became a crucial element of the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense System. The notion of the NATO collective defense and purely defensive character of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland made it much more acceptable to Polish society. After 2010, hosting the U.S. missile defense assets was no longer unique to Poland. Moreover, Poland decided

to acquire tactical ballistic missile defense capability itself, which changed the internal political debate related to participation in the NATO and U.S. missile defense programs (Cieślak, 2020). The host nations for the U.S. European Phased Adaptive Approach have included Turkey (a U.S. ballistic missile radar at Kürecik), Romania (an Aegis Ashore site at Deveselu Air Base) and Germany (the command center at the Ramstein Air Base). Spain hosts four multi-mission Aegis ships at its naval base in Rota. Several NATO member states provide further ground-based air and missile defense and force protection assets. Other Allies are also developing or acquiring BMD-capable assets that could eventually be made available for NATO BMD. The Netherlands and Denmark decided to upgrade their frigates with extended long-range missile defense early-warning radars as its national contribution to NATO's ballistic missile defense capability. The United Kingdom decided to develop a ground-based ballistic missile defense radar to enhance the coverage and effectiveness of the NATO ballistic missile defense capability (NATO, 2021).

3. Polish public opinion on hosting the U.S. missile defense complex

Bearing in mind the above political and military developments, there was no doubt that Polish public opinion would influence the government's attitude towards hosting elements of the American ballistic missile defense system on Polish territory. To some extent, the changes in support granted by Polish society to the project could be compared to the historical impact of political actions on the change of public opinion in the U.S. on nuclear weapons and energy (Joppke, 1993; Kasperson et al., 1980; Downey, 1986; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). One may also argue that Polish public opinion has been influenced by ongoing convincing efforts by supporters on both sides of the debate. It was also obvious that Polish policymakers would do much to be aware of citizens' attitudes towards hosting the U.S. missile defense complex (Baron and Herzog, 2020) and thus have support in the actions taken.

The attitude of Poles to locating elements of the U.S. missile defense complex has been researched by the Public Opinion Research Center (CBOS) since 2004, i.e. from the moment this issue appeared for the first time in public debate in Poland. Initially, the attitude was rather positive as proved by public opinion polls conducted in February 2004 (Grudniewicz, 2004). Then, throughout the years 2006-2009, the respondents' attitude turned to be more and more often negative than positive. Opinions improved slightly in the second half of 2008, after the Polish-American agreement on the missile defense complex had been signed (Feliksiak, 2008a). Support to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland rose significantly after June 2016. At that time the supporters of the construction missile defense complex began to dominate its opponents decisively, which was confirmed in the last poll in 2019.

The attitude of the respondents to hosting some elements of the American missile defense installations in Poland, was primarily related to two issues. First, public opinion was concerned about the permanent basing of troops from other NATO countries on Polish territory. Typically, the supporters of the U.S. missile defense complex have been those who believe that troops from other NATO countries should be deployed to Poland. Those who have opposed the plans have been mainly reluctant to the permanent presence of allied troops in Poland. Second, Poles were concerned that the construction of the U.S. missile defense installation in Poland would increase the risk of aggression from another country. Therefore, having societal support for hosting the U.S. missile defense complex was very important for Polish political elites. It proved to be a very important issue before signing the

agreement on the placement of elements of the American missile defense system, as well as later, during the construction of the complex in Redzikowo.

The first survey on Poles' opinions on the possible deployment of the U.S. military bases in Poland was conducted by CBOS in 2004. At that time, 38 percent of respondents were in favor of hosting the U.S. military bases in Poland. However, almost the same number (36 percent) expressed their opposition to such an idea. Every sixth respondent (17 percent) declared an indifferent attitude to this issue, and every eleventh respondent (9 percent) did not have an opinion at all. The supporters for locating the U.S. military bases in Poland were men (48 percent), residents of large (46 percent) and the largest cities (42 percent), people with higher education (49 percent), management and intelligentsia (57 percent) (Grudniewicz, 2004).

More elaborate polls on public opinion toward the U.S. military presence in Poland were conducted in 2005. At that time around half of the respondents (51 percent) would accept the placement of airspace control radars, and slightly more than two-fifths (42 percent) would agree to military bases with a small number of soldiers and weapons stocks. Both levels of support were lower than in 2004, respectively by 9 and 10 percent. Air defense and missile defense installations had more opponents (45 percent, an increase in indications by five points) than supporters (39 percent, a decrease by eight points). About a third of Poles would then support airbases with the U.S. aircraft and airmen (31 percent, down 8 points) and large military bases with tactical formations (29 percent, down 6 points). As can be seen, the acceptance of not only large military bases has decreased, compared to 2004, but also the approval for a possible deployment of small military facilities with specialized equipment in our country has decreased. In 2005, most Poles agreed only to locate specialized radars in Poland (Paterek, 2006).

In mid-2006, the project of locating the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland was supported by slightly more than a third of the respondents (35 percent), including 15 percent of those who strongly supported this project. More than half of the respondents (54 percent) were against it, including 28 percent who were strongly against it and 26 who were against. Since December 2005, public support for making Polish territory available for the installation of this type of defense system has decreased by 15 percentage points. It is worth noting that the location of the U.S. missile defense base in Poland was mostly opposed by women (63 percent), while men supported this project slightly more often (47 percent) than they were against (44 percent). Support for hosting U.S. missile defense complex in Poland was largely age-dependent. Among young people under 35, this idea had almost as many supporters as opponents. Among the respondents over 35, the opponents gained the advantage. And among the elderly, aged 65 and over, there were three times more opponents than the supporters of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. The attitude towards this matter was not influenced by the respondents' level of education (Strzeszewski, 2006; 2007)

The year 2007 was very important for the decision on hosting elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Poland. In July 2007, Poland's President Lech Kaczyński visited the United States. The talks concerned, inter alia, the location of the U.S. missile defense base, as well as proposals to strengthen Poland's security in the context of the changed geostrategic situation. The results of a public opinion poll conducted in June 2007 indicated that the majority of Poles (60 percent) still opposed the construction of elements of the American anti-missile defense shield in Poland, with every third (35 percent) expressing strong opposition. 26 percent of respondents were in favor of locating such installations in Poland, but only seven percent had no doubts about it. In 2005-2007, there was a systematic increase in the percentage of people opposing the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. In August 2007, the number of opponents of the deployment of the missile shield elements in Poland increased once again slightly (by 3 percentage points). Among the many criticisms of such direct involvement of Poland in the US defense system, the argument was

made that the installation takes place outside the defense alliance to which both countries belong, i.e. NATO. In the opinion of Poles, support for this initiative among Poles would increase if the placement of a missile launchers in Poland was part of the NATO strategy, and not only a part of the US defense system. Two-fifths of the respondents (39 percent) believed that the installation of elements of the missile defense system in Poland would be acceptable if NATO sponsored its implementation. Only a few (4 percent) considered such a solution to be worse. For one third of the respondents (34 percent), it did not make any difference whether the antimissile shield would be implemented within NATO or not. Almost every fourth respondent (23 percent) did not have a specific opinion on this issue (Pankowski, 2007; Feliksiak, 2007). Looking at the results of the polls through the prism of gender, men more often than women supported the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. Among men, the number of supporters was not much lower than that of opponents, and women in the vast majority were against it. Opinions on this matter were not related either to the education of the respondents or to their place of residence (Wenzel, 2007).

In the first half of 2008, the majority of Poles (53 percent) were again against installing a foreign missile defense base in Poland. Every third respondent (33 percent) expressed support for this initiative. In social circles, the project of locating the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland, had the most supporters among the self-employed. In this group, supporters outweighed opponents of the U.S. missile defense complex. More or less equal numbers of supporters and opponents were among the management and intelligentsia, as well as school and university students, and inhabitants of the cities with a population of over 100,000. On the other hand, the greatest number of opponents was among the poorest respondents, retired people and the elderly, as well as women, especially the unemployed. An important issue that was on Poles' minds in 2008 was the increase in the United States' contribution to the security of Poland in exchange for allowing the construction of a missile defense complex. The proportions of support and opposition to the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex were reversed with this problem. Half of the respondents (50 percent) supported the construction of such a base, and a further four percent declared their unconditional support. In total, 54% of respondents supported the decisions to allow the U.S. construction of a missile defense complex in Poland if that would increase the U.S. support to Poland's security and defense. However, 35 percent of respondents sustained their objection to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland (Strzeszewski, 2008; Feliksiak, 2008b).

The issue of locating the elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Polish was decided on August 20, 2008. The Polish government signed an agreement with the United States on the deployment of antiballistic missiles on the territory of Poland and the conditions for accepting this installation. This event was followed by a breakthrough in public opinion. Already in September 2008, the first significant increase in the public opinion's support for the placement of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland was noticeable. Although Poles believed that the negotiations on hosting the U.S. missile defense installations in Poland were carried out ineffectively, nearly half of the respondents (49 percent) believed that they would lead to the creation of a missile defense shield on the territory of our country. Every fifth respondent (21 percent) doubted that the negotiations were concluded in such a way, and almost every third (30 percent) was unable to answer this question. Even though the voices of skepticism were still clear, it could be observed that some people who had previously had a negative attitude to this project were impressed by the government's policy on this issue. Perhaps Poles were to some extent guided by the events taking place in Georgia at that time (the Russian-Georgian conflict). This thread, however, had quite an ambiguous impact on the social perception of the acceptance of the U.S. missile defense complex by Poland, and more precisely revealed the ambiguous attitude of society

towards relations with Russia. Although support for the U.S. missile defense complex increased significantly, fears of an offensive reaction from Russia, remained at a fairly high level even during the negotiations. Moreover, every third respondent believed that Russia's critical position towards the placement of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland was justified (Feliksiak, 2008c). From September 2008, however, the majority of Poles again began to oppose the construction of installations on the territory of our country, but in relation to the previous, March poll, they opposed to a lesser extent. In a poll conducted in September 2008, 41 percent of respondents supported hosting the U.S. missile defense complex by Poland, while 46 percent were against it. In December 2008 support to the U.S. missile defense system fell to 39 percent, against opposition to it rose to 47 percent of respondents (Feliksiak, 2009).

In 2009 the new President Barack Obama announced that the United States would withdraw from the plans to locate the missile defense launchers in Poland and the radar in the Czech Republic. This move influenced the public opinion in Poland. In September 2009, nearly half of the respondents (48 percent) did not want to locate antiballistic missile launchers in Poland, but at the same time almost two fifths of respondents (38 percent) were in favor of building it (Feliksiak, 2009). In October 2009, the U.S. government proposed a new, smaller interceptor launcher facility to be constructed in Poland. The project was to follow similar timelines as the original plans envisaged by the Bush administration. To some extent, it was a face-saving move for the U.S. government in the eyes of Poles. From 2010 to mid-2016, Poles were not asked about the issues related to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland and no public opinion polls on this specific topic were conducted during that period.

It was only when on July 8-9, 2016 in Warsaw, another NATO summit was held, that CBOS conducted a study in which it asked whether Poles were for or against construction in Poland of antiballistic missile launchers being a part of the U.S. ballistic missile defense system. Construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland received the highest support since 2005. The supporters of the project had the numerical advantage over its opponents (58 percent compared to 25 percent). Again, in 2016, a significant group of respondents did not have a definite opinion on this matter (17 percent). The attitude to the construction of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland was mostly defined by gender. Men were much more likely to support of the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland (68 percent) than women (49 percent). While declared party preferences did not influence the respondents' choices much, the majority of strong supporters were people declaring right-wing political views. The perception of the threat of a missile attack by other countries against Poland as a result of hosting the U.S. missile defense complex has not changed much. In 2016 59 percent of respondents were concerned about such a threat, while slightly over a quarter (26 percent) believed that such a threat did not exist (CBOS, 2016). The unfolding conflict in Ukraine raised the support of Polish public opinion for membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, but also for the permanent presence of troops from other NATO countries in Poland, which was also the case for the U.S. missile defense complex in Redzikowo.

In a 2018 CBOS study entitled "On Polish-American relations and the presidency of Donald Trump", the respondents positively assessed Polish-American relations. They justified their opinion with military cooperation, a defense alliance (within NATO and bilateral contacts), and American security guarantees for Poland (26 percent in this group). Almost every fifth respondent (19 percent) pointed specifically at the presence of American troops and the U.S. missile defense installations in Poland. Positive assessments were built primarily on the basis of the visible military cooperation, defense alliance, security guarantees (both in bilateral relations and within NATO), a tangible example of which was the presence of the U.S. troops and military installations in Poland (Badora, 2018).

The last opinion poll, in which the questions related directly to the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland were asked, took place in January 2019. The Public Opinion Research Center conducted a poll entitled "The event of 2018 in Poland and in the world". The respondents were to indicate the most important, in their opinion, event in 2018. They were asked to mention the most important event for Poland and the one which, in their opinion, was the most famous on an international scale. The events mentioned by the respondents included various aspects of Polish-American relations related to defense such as establishment of the U.S. military base in Poland (the so-called Fort Trump), deployment of the U.S. troops in Żagań. The respondents indicated the development of the elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Poland among the most important events in Poland in 2018. Since 2019, no public opinion polls have been conducted on the public perception of hosting the elements of the U.S. missile defense in Poland.

4. Conclusions

Summing up research on the opinion of Poles on hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland, one can clearly see how it reflected a broader strategic context. Public opinion in Poland was shaped by the evolving military threat from Russia, as well as political and military developments in bilateral security and defense cooperation with the United States. Linkages between the perception of threats to national security and the reception of Polish-American relations as well as the attitude towards NATO are clearly visible. The better the Poles perceived the U.S. and NATO, the better the mood and the lower the fears related to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. In most public opinion polls, over the course of fifteen years (2004-2019), people with university education, management and intelligentsia supported building U.S. missile defense complex on the territory of Poland. In terms of gender, the missile defense shield was more often supported by men than women, while in terms of age, by young people than by retirees. International events were also significant, especially those related to the politics or activities of the Russian Federation, such as aggression against Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014.

Poland's membership of NATO has been closely related to the support for hosting the U.S. missile defense complex in Poland. The support for NATO membership and undertakings related to it rose significantly after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine (2014). This is expressed not only in support for membership in the North Atlantic Alliance, but also for the permanent presence of troops from other NATO countries in Poland. Despite unchanged opinions about the possible threat of a missile attack from another country due to the construction of an American missile defense complex in Poland, the support for hosting it has also increased significantly after 2014. It should be remembered that the political actions of Polish government related to hosting the U.S. missile defense complex were undertaken without the participation of the public, therefore the rulers were trying to gain approval of these actions. The best way to learn about social expectations was to get to know people's opinion, which was commonly identified with the reaction or awareness of people on a given topic. In case of hosting the U.S. missile defense complex, Polish authorities managed to respond to public opinion expectations and, to some extent, shape them in a way that was conducive to further developments in the bilateral cooperation with the United States in the field of national security and defense.

Declaration of interest

The author declares that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

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