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## Geopolitical Strategy of the Russian Federation in Relation to the Epicenter of the Visegrad Group on the Example of Poland in the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Abstract:**

**Purpose:** An attempt to determine the possibility of using the global epidemic's state to implement geopolitical objectives by the Russian Federation on the example of Poland in the wider context of international geopolitical conditions around the Visegrad Group.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** The paper uses mainly source texts and the content of expert interviews conducted at the turn of 2019/2020. The collected empirical data were then processed using theoretical methods such as analysis, synthesis, and comparison to formulate conclusions using deductive and inductive inference methods.

**Findings:** It has been confirmed that in their foreign policy, the decision-making centers of the Russian Federation are willing to take advantage of the situation of the global epidemic to achieve their own geopolitical goals concerning other countries.

**Practical Implications:** This study may be used in scientific and expert work on the Russian Federation's foreign policy in the COVID-19 era.

**Originality/Value:** Lack of comprehensive scientific studies dedicated to implementing the Russian Federation's geopolitical objectives during the COVID-19 2019/2020 epidemic.

**Keywords:** Russian Federation, Russia, Kremlin, COVID-19, geopolitics, geostrategy, epidemic.

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## **1. Introduction**

Poland has a special place in the Kremlin's geopolitical game for influence in Central and Eastern Europe. This is due to Warsaw's important role in several parallel geostrategic games conducted by Washington, Brussels, Moscow, and even Beijing. From Washington's perspective, Poland is an extremely dedicated ally that identifies its own national interests with those of the United States, even identifying its own ability to oppose Russia's aggression with sufficiently strong ties to the United States. In the game of influence, Polish decision-makers have repeatedly indicated that by choosing between the European Union and the American interests, they will ultimately choose the latter. On the other hand, Poland is an important element in stabilizing the geopolitical and geostrategic situation on the eastern borders of the Union and a country that initiates and conducts activities aimed at the possible enlargement of the Union to include Eastern European countries. Equally important for Brussels are also the strong political and economic ties between the countries of Central Europe, among which Poland has a strong position, regardless of the changing directions of its foreign policy in this part of Europe. The additional value of Poland's presence in the EU consists of maintaining good and constantly strengthened relations with the so-called Baltic States (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia), which is also correlated with American policy in Eastern Europe.

In the article, the authors attempted to answer a problem question: Can the Russian Federation use the implications of the global epidemiological situation related to COVID-19 in its geopolitical plans for Poland? The reason for undertaking this issue was the ongoing observation of changes in the international arena as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and an attempt to determine the implications for the possibility of achieving Russian geopolitical goals while at the same time increasing the dynamics of foreign activity of the Russian Federation since the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

## **2. Literature Review**

Thus, gaining the opportunity to influence Warsaw's political decision-making process allows influencing Brussels and Washington's foreign policy, leading to mutual animosities or the non-conflicting pursuit of specific interests. In the pessimistic variant, taking control of Warsaw would significantly weaken American influence in this part of Europe and guarantee the possibility of a strong influence on Brussels' internal decision-making process (Baumann 2020; Götz 2016; Götz 2017).

Given the complex network of mutual relations between Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, and the Baltic States, the benefits of such an action would be particularly valuable for Moscow, striving to rebuild the sphere of influence lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the current situation, many Russian initiatives may be limited or even blocked, and decision-makers in the Kremlin are never sure

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whether it is Warsaw's own initiative or coordinated action in agreement with Washington or, in extreme cases, with Brussels. An example of such events was the Polish involvement during the war in Georgia (Seguin *et al.*, 2016; Bayulgen and Arbatlim, 2013), which ultimately led to a reduction in the initially intended actions due to the lack of certainty as to the actual initiators potentially responsible for the actions taken by the Polish capital at that time on the territory considered by the Kremlin as its own exclusive sphere of influence.

It may sound high-flying, but Poland can be compared to the chessboard center during a game of chess if this game was about taking control of the geopolitical and geostrategic situation in Central and Eastern Europe. This particular situation is also known to decision-makers in Beijing who, when planning the New Silk Road project aimed at gradually expanding and strengthening the Chinese sphere of influence in Europe, identified Poland as a gateway to the free development of the project concerning both Central Europe and the Balkans. Thus, if you gain the opportunity to influence the Polish decision-making process, you can influence the American sphere of influence, the EU decision-making process, and the New Silk Road project in Europe, which is strategically important for Beijing. In conclusion, the Russians will not give up on seeking to regain their former influence or even trying to take control of decisions made in Warsaw, as these decisions are seen as strategically important for the Russian national interest, but also from a geostrategic point of view the possibility of establishing an appropriate buffer zone providing the Russian Federation with safe space in the event of hostile military and paramilitary actions.

Regardless of the European perspective and the perception of such threats as unrealistic, this way of thinking and perceiving the surrounding international reality still prevails in Moscow. For this reason, any form of strengthening the American presence in Poland (especially in the military dimension) is perceived in Moscow as an increase in the real threat. Therefore, it is no wonder that decision-makers in the Kremlin are using all possible forces and means to prevent or limit any action aimed at successively strengthening the American potential in this part of Europe, especially in Poland. On the other hand, the weakening of this potential or the complete resignation of Washington from Poland as an ally would immediately be seen as an incredible opportunity that should be used immediately to take control of such an attractive "no-man's-land" from Moscow's point of view. Russians perceive international reality through the prism of the powers, their interests, and zones of influence.

Individual weaker states outside any alliance with major powers shall be treated as assets, which, depending on their value, shall be developed as soon as possible to prevent other powers from taking advantage of this opportunity. Such a perception of Poland by Moscow is undoubtedly damaging to the Polish sense of decency and respect for its own, so dearly paid independence. Unfortunately, this Russian approach is also true. As a result, Russian decision-makers will continue to view Poland only

as a valuable international asset to be sought after and await a suitable opportunity to rebuild a sufficiently strong position by including Warsaw in their own highly hierarchical sphere of influence.

### **3. Research Results and Discussion**

The epidemiological threat resulting from the uncontrolled spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus has profoundly remodeled the global socio-economic system, affecting its previously stable functioning (Szymanski, Smuniewski, and Platek, 2020). In this sudden new reality, many new challenges have crystallized, from which threats and opportunities for the powers seeking new opportunities to pursue their interests may flow. It was no different this time, too, in the case of the Russian view of Poland, which has become the object of intense informational influences aimed mainly at dividing Polish society into smaller groups with conflicting viewpoints.

Also, rapidly forming ad-hoc view groups joined in the rivalry between the two main political forces: the option currently in power and the opposition's comprehensive perception. In the second half of 2020, presidential elections were held, which also served as a basis for expanding the epidemic's various narrative lines. This has allowed Russian media centers, on the one hand, to keep up to date with the possibilities of shaping public opinion in this particular period and, on the other hand, to test in practice the possibilities of influencing electoral decisions. One month before the electoral campaign's intensification, all election polls (conducted both by the ruling camp, opposition circles, and neutral companies providing professional polling services) gave the candidate of the ruling option a decisive advantage over rivals representing the opposition forces. At the time of the election, this candidate won with an almost marginal advantage, and, statistically speaking, the results of both candidates were equal. This means that in the course of the election, the ruling option candidate lost his advantage only a month earlier, which demonstrated how strong the impact of a particular epidemiological state of emergency generating an elevated emotional state in most voters could be on the outcome of the election.

On the other hand, the ruling camp received a clear warning signal, indicating that it is beginning to lose its advantage over the opposition, and public support is falling. It cannot be clearly stated that the outcome of the elections resulted from the activities of the Russian centers responsible for information impact (Monica, Nicolae, and Breban, 2010). However, the expert interviews conducted show that these centers were strongly involved in antagonizing Polish society by evoking stormy discussions and creating elevated emotional states mainly through activity carried out in virtual space.

It should be added that the model of informational influence by evoking and increasing extreme (most often negative) emotional states is a tool of psychological influence that has been used continuously and improved for decades and has been

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used first by Soviet and later Russian information centers (Baumann, 2020; Hejlová and Klimeš, 2019; Myers, 2015). There were many scientific centers in the Soviet Union improving so-called social control engineering to evoke and direct social moods and, if necessary, the behavior of crowds (Monica, Nicolae, and Breban, 2010). Nowadays, virtual space is most often used for this purpose, including social media, which can be proved by using the services of the so-called "troll farms" (Shaikhutdinova, 2020).

Regardless of the level of effectiveness achieved by Russian information activities on Polish society, one can undoubtedly state that the goal was to divide into antagonistic social groups with opposite views internally. Such activities could also fit into the early stages of the so-called "ideological diversion" described by Y. Bezmienowa (2017). Mutual antagonization of the society, in the end, leads to the functioning of many opposing groups, which allows to create and strengthen the chosen group in order to take over the power over the given society finally. From that point on, this group aims further to strengthen the Kremlin's influence in a given country or strengthen its own power to destabilize the economy to a level that allows another group, also created and promoted, to take full (absolute) power. Therefore, knowing the "modus operandi" of Russian information activities and being aware that they intensified during the epidemiological state resulting from the spread of COVID-19, it can be assumed that the aim was to influence the Polish decision-making process.

#### **4. Conclusions**

Considering the Kremlin's geopolitical perspective on Poland's location at the meeting point of the zones of influence of the four powers, it can be assumed that the objective of the information activities undertaken during the COVID-19 epidemic is to weaken Polish-American and ultimately Polish-Union relations. As a result, from Moscow's perspective, this process should end with Poland's exit from NATO and the EU, which would open the way for decisive and intensive action to regain control over Warsaw's decision-making process.

On the one hand, it would significantly weaken the United States' position in Central and Eastern Europe, which is strategically vital for Moscow, but it would also open up opportunities for much more offensive action towards Central, Southern, and Northern Europe. It would significantly cut off the Baltic States from the US-EU sphere of influence, increasing their influence on their decision-making centers. Almost immediately, it would also solve the growing problem of Belarus seeking total decision-making sovereignty. All these activities would be possible at a relatively low cost, while at the same time enabling the Kremlin to achieve its long-term geopolitical and geostrategic goals in this part of the world so crucial for Russian decision-makers.

In conclusion, the accepted problem question was answered, and potential geopolitical and geostrategic consequences resulting from the implementation of Russian long-

term plans for Poland perceived as an essential element of Central and Eastern Europe's security architecture were identified.

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