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# ***PERSPECTIVES***

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## **Russian and Polish Relations: A New Era**

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Russia and Poland have shared a long and often troubled historical relationship. This has involved wars, rebellions, repressions, and partitions. Momentous changes in Europe during the late 1980s and early 1990s, including the fall of communism in Central and Eastern Europe and the breakup of the Soviet Union, as well as ongoing Euro-Atlantic integration via North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and European Union (E.U.) enlargement, have provided new opportunities and new challenges for Russian and Polish relations. The international impact of September 11, 2001 and globalization have also played a role in forging new prospects for improved relations between these two historical rivals and adversaries.

America has had very good relations with Poland since the demise of communism. Washington admired the Poles' courage in challenging the communist system and strongly supported their aspirations to gain NATO and E.U. membership. Pope John Paul II's Polish background and the large Polish-American community in the United States also enhanced America's positive perception of Poland. Multiple high-level visits by Presidents Bush and Kwasniewski also underscore the view of Poland as a valued and reliable strategic partner of the United States. Poland's joining the coalition of the willing to oust Saddam Hussein and its deployment of military troops to Iraq, as well as its being asked to command an international sector of peacekeepers in Iraq, further highlights Poland's elevated international profile and close relationship with Washington.

For its part, Russia has been an important state for the United States since the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. After an initial honeymoon period, U.S.-Russian relations gave rise to mutual disappointment and conflicts over NATO enlargement, the Kosovo War, Iraq, Iran, and Chechnya among other issues. Nevertheless, Russia was a state with whom Washington wanted better relations given its status as a nuclear superpower and its permanent and veto-wielding membership on the United Nations Security Council. The need for an international coalition to fight terrorism and the good personal chemistry between Presidents Bush and Putin helped forge improved U.S. and Russian relations after September 11, 2001. Although U.S. and Russian ties suffered a short-term setback over the Iraq war, overall bilateral relations have not been seriously damaged.

Given the United States' close relationship with Poland and growing relationship with Russia and their importance for U.S. national security, in combating terrorism, limiting weapons of mass destruction, and ensuring stability and security in Europe, understanding the evolution and prospects for Russian-Polish relations is vital for American national security. Thus, this article will examine and analyze various aspects of recent Russian and Polish relations since 2000, when Vladimir Putin became President of Russia. Bilateral relations between these two Slavic neighbors had been cold during much of the 1990s and this continued into early 2000. During the ensuing three years, however, there has emerged a new era of good relations in Russian-Polish ties. What explains the new era in Russian-Polish relations and what are the prospects for the future?

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## Spy Scandal and Chechen Protests

January 20, 2000 Poland expelled nine Russian diplomats for spying. This represented the largest spy scandal since the collapse of the U.S.S.R. The Russian Foreign Intelligence Service's Warsaw station was said to have been utterly decimated by the expulsions. The Russian government and media described the spy scandal as a "political provocation" to damage Russian and Polish relations, prior to a presidential election in Poland. But as one Russian commentator acknowledged:

"Our bilateral relations are already in deep crisis and could hardly get much worse . . ."1

From the Russian perspective, incidents involving spying should be handled quietly and thus in Izvestia reporter shifted the blame for the crisis onto the Poles' animosity towards Russia:

"Historical grievances and prejudices are tenacious things. . . . even today, when there is no longer any Russian threat, the Poles are quite incapable of learning how to deal with us impartially . . . . They continue to take an excessively emotional view of us. They don't like us, but at the same time they utterly refuse to forget us and leave us alone."2

Russia retaliated by expelling nine Polish diplomats from Moscow. This incident was not the first spy scandal involving Russia and Poland during the past decade. A Russian military attaché was expelled during the fall of 1996 and even more significantly a Polish Prime Minister, Josef Oleksy, resigned from power in January 1996 based on unsubstantiated allegations of his having worked for the Soviet KGB and Russian special services. Poland's entrance into NATO produced a more vigorous counterintelligence environment in Warsaw and heightened the inducement for Russian intelligence operatives to monitor security related developments. The spy scandal occurred during Putin's first month as Acting President and given his KGB/FSB career affiliations the incident likely embarrassed Putin and exacerbated the crisis in Russian-Polish relations.

On February 23, 2000 Chechen protests occurred at Russian consulates in Poznan, Krakow, and Gdansk and at the Russian embassy in Warsaw. These protests were timed to coincide with the anniversary of the deportation of the Chechen nation by Stalin in 1944. The protest action in Poznan was especially humiliating for the Russians as the Chechens

". . . tore down a Russian flag, shredded and burned it, and then attached the green flag of Ichkeria (Chechnya) to the building. Next the hooligans used a can of black spray paint to scrawl anti-Russian slogans all over the facade of the consulate general. They added a fascist swastika and then signed their work . . ."3

The response of the Polish police in Poznan was said to have been passive. That some Poles participated in pro-Chechen protests elsewhere also was a sore point for the Russians.

For years Russia has strongly objected to the presence of Chechen organizations in Poland such as the Chechen Information Center, the Free Caucasus Committee, and the Poland-Chechnya Committee. The Polish government responded to those objections by noting that the Chechen organizations are private and are not supported by Polish authorities. On February 25, 2000, in retaliation for the Poznan incident, several national Bolsheviks threw bottles at the Polish embassy in Moscow. Subsequently, Polish authorities fired two police chiefs and launched an investigation of twelve policemen over the Poznan incident. Russia welcomed the Polish response, but expected more restrictions on pro-Chechen organizations.

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1 *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* (hereafter CDPSP), Vol. 52, No.4, February 23, 2000, p. 22.

2 Ibid.

3 CDPSP, Vol. 52, No. 8 , March 22, 2000, p. 21.

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## From NATO Enlargement to NATO-Russia Council

Russia strongly opposed NATO's eastward enlargement, which in 1999 brought Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into NATO.<sup>4</sup> From Moscow's perspective, NATO was a Cold War military bloc that lost much of its relevance with the demise of the U.S.S.R and the Warsaw Pact. Furthermore, eastward enlargement created a new division of Europe and brought NATO directly on Russia's border via the Kaliningrad exclave. Russia felt betrayed by former Central and East European allies that quickly distanced themselves from democratic Russia in matters of security and aligned themselves with NATO. Poland's drive for NATO membership was especially hurtful given its geopolitical significance, proximity to Russia, and Warsaw being the namesake of the Warsaw Pact.

Moscow did receive assurances from NATO that it had no plans to deploy nuclear weapons in Poland or other new member states, nor to station significant NATO troop deployments there. For its part, Warsaw sought to reassure Moscow that Poland's joining NATO was not directed against Russia and, indeed, Poland expected to increase its military cooperation with Russia subsequently. Throughout the 1990s Russia expressed its preference for an all-European security architecture via the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, where it would enjoy full and equal membership.

Once Moscow reluctantly accepted Poland's imminent accession into NATO it then sought to dissuade further NATO enlargement, particularly involving the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, former Soviet republics, and possibly Ukraine. Poland, however, was a strong proponent of NATO's open-door policy of continued enlargement and was a vocal supporter of the Baltic states as well as being an advocate for Ukraine. Thus, the second-wave of NATO enlargement again proved to be an irritant in Russian-Polish relations.

The improvement in U.S. and Russian relations in the aftermath of September 11, 2001 helped ease Moscow's opposition to the Baltic states' invitation in 2002 to join NATO. Furthermore, at the Rome summit, a NATO-Russia Council was established in May 2002.<sup>5</sup> This new institution represented an upgrade from the previous NATO and Russia Charter Accord. Rather than a 19 + 1 formula, whereby NATO members would consult and arrive at a consensus view and then discuss matters with Russia, the new formula was 20. Russia now gained an important right to co-decision-making with NATO members on select issues, countering terrorism, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, missile defense, peacekeeping, and managing regional crises. NATO sources described the new arrangement as decision-making based on consensus among equal partners. The NATO-Russia Council signified a reduction in the gulf between NATO and Russia. That Poland played a constructive role in the promotion of deeper NATO-Russia ties, was greatly appreciated by both Moscow and Washington.

Recently, Poland and Russia have also pursued some military cooperation. Poland and Russia announced a military cooperation accord to modernize Poland's MIG-29 fighters and Mi-24 attack helicopters in April 2003.<sup>6</sup>

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4 Suzanne Crow, "Russian Views on an Eastward Expansion of NATO," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* (hereafter RFE/RL) Research Reports, Vol. 2, No. 41, 15 October 1993.

5 See "Russia and NATO Approve a New Formula for Cooperation," *Center for Eastern Studies*, Comments, May 16, 2002, at [www.osw.waw.pl/en/epub/ekoment/earc2002\\_kom.htm](http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/epub/ekoment/earc2002_kom.htm) (therein one can locate the 2002 index and find the above mentioned article). Also see "NATO-Russia Relations: A New Quality," *NATO Fact Sheets*, June 2002 at [www.nato.int/docu/Facts/nato-rus.htm](http://www.nato.int/docu/Facts/nato-rus.htm).

6 "Moscow, Warsaw to Sign Military Accord," RFE/RL *Newsline*, <http://www.rferl.org/newsline/2002/04/230403.asp>.

Only several days before, however, Poland and United States Lockheed Martin announced a blockbuster military deal to purchase 48 F-16 jet fighters for the Polish military for \$3.5 billion. Poland's decision to work with Russia on military modernization likely was intended to reassure Russia and save money. Russia's ambassador to Poland underscored the mutual readiness for joint international peacekeeping, joint command and staff exercises, and army combat training.<sup>7</sup>

Such military cooperation creates greater mutual trust and can further stimulate cooperation in other areas. On June 10, 2003 Russian officials also proposed helping Poland in its Iraq peacekeeping mission by sharing its experience and intelligence about Iraq.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the potential establishment of four American and NATO military bases on Polish territory could strain Russian-Polish military ties. As Moscow would likely interpret such a military deployment as a renegeing on previous assurances to not deploy significant NATO forces in the newest member states.

### European Union Enlargement: Kaliningrad and Visas

Unlike NATO enlargement, Russia did not vehemently oppose or criticize the European Union's eastward enlargement or Poland's decision to join the European Union. Moscow did, however, begin to raise concerns about the negative consequences that Poland and Lithuania's membership in the European Union would pose for the Kaliningrad exclave.<sup>9</sup>



7 Nikolai Afansievskii, "Poland: Creating a Secure and United Europe," *International Affairs* (Moscow), Vol. 48, No. 3, 2002, pp. 181-182.

8 "Russia Proposes to Help Poland Carry Out Peacekeeping Mission in Iraq," *Rosbalt News Agency*, June 10, 2003, <http://www.rosbaltnews.com/print/print?cn=62963>.

9 *CDPSP*, Vol. 54, No. 22, June 26, 2002, pp. 19-20.

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Kaliningrad, which borders on Poland and Lithuania but not mainland Russia, had been a heavily militarized region during the Cold War that currently faces serious economic problems.

Russia's concern was that the residents of Kaliningrad faced particular difficulties being surrounded by prospective European Union states given the Schengen commitments to ensure tight border controls with non-European Union states. Thus, Kaliningrad residents traveling by land to mainland Russia would need a foreign visa to travel within their own country, a humiliating and problematic scenario for Russia. Russia thus sought special travel concessions for Kaliningrad from both Poland and Lithuania as well as the European Union. Poland underscored, however, that it was not a transit country for land travel to mainland Russia and thus the special travel needs for Kaliningrad residents was a matter between Russia and Lithuania. The European Union, Lithuania, and Russia agreed on facilitated travel documents for Kaliningrad residents traveling to and from mainland Russia rather than formal visas. These travel documents are to be inexpensive and obtainable at railway stations and travel agencies rather than via Lithuanian consulates.

Beyond the issue of transit, for Poland, Kaliningrad was a region of special interest because of its shared border with northwest Poland. Polish trade with Kaliningrad is significant and exceeds Germany's trade with the former German region.<sup>10</sup> Polish businessmen, however, have been more reluctant to invest in mainland Russia given their concerns about the lack of legal and insurance protection for foreign investment, the problem of organized crime, and political corruption. In a best case scenario, Kaliningrad has the potential to become a bridge between Russia and Poland as well as between Russia and the European Union, if it can attract sufficient foreign investment and undertake substantial economic reforms.

Based on European Union and Schengen expectations, Poland had declared it would require visas for Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians as of October 1, 2003. Poland is doing all it can to ease the disruption this visa-regime will cause for its eastern neighbors. Somewhere between 2.75 and 4 million or so Russians visit Poland annually and they comprise a key element of the suitcase trade.<sup>11</sup> Poland has thus delayed imposition of the visa-regime on its neighbors and will ensure that the cost of the visas will be minimal, with multiple-use visas available for special groups. Poland does not want to undermine cross-border trade, particularly during a time of high unemployment nor does it wish to damage relations with its eastern neighbors. As a result, Poland and Russia have agreed to allow free visas for Kaliningrad residents traveling to Poland and for Poles traveling to Kaliningrad.

### **Russian and Polish Trade**

Russian and Polish trade has been fairly significant in recent years with total annual trade turnover averaging about \$4 to \$5.5 billion dollars. During this period, however, Poland has experienced rising trade deficits with Russia. This negative trade balance rose to nearly \$2 billion in 1999 and a hefty \$3.8 billion in 2000. Russia's financial crisis of 1998 led to a significant reduction in Russian imports from Poland for several years and rising energy costs have hurt Poland's trade balance. Indeed, over 80 percent of Poland's imports from Russia in 2001 were fuels (oil and natural gas) whereas Polish exports to Russia comprised food and agricultural produce 43 percent, chemical products 17 percent and machinery 12 percent.<sup>12</sup> Among all of Poland's trade partners Russia ranked second (only behind Germany) in their export activity. Russia's exports to Poland represented 8.8 percent of all Poland's imports, while German exports

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10 Afanasievskii, Poland, pp. 179.

11 "Tighter Border Control," *The Warsaw Voice*, February 17, 2002, No.7 (695). Putin cited a figure of 4 million Russians visiting Poland at a press conference in Warsaw, while the respected Polish think-tank the Center for Eastern Studies estimates that 4.4 million Russians from Kaliningrad alone visit Poland annually.

12 "Russia-Poland Trade Turnover Amounted to Over U.S.D 5.6 billion in 2001," *Pravda*, <http://english.pravda.ru/world/2002/01/15/25590.html>.

comprised 24 percent of Poland’s imports.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, Poland’s exports to Russia comprised a mere 2.9 percent of total Polish exports.

	<b>Total Turnover \$ (billion)</b>	<b>Polish Exports to Russia</b>	<b>Polish Imports from Russia</b>	<b>Balance</b>
<b>Year</b>				
1996	4.18	1.65	2.53	-.88
1997	4.84	2.15	2.69	-.54
1998	3.97	1.60	2.37	-.77
1999	3.39	.71	2.68	-1.97
2000	5.48	.86	4.62	-3.76
2001	5.48	1.06	4.42	-3.36
2002*	4.62	1.09	3.53	-2.44

\*Figures for the year 2002 are for the first ten months only. Note that all the data have been rounded.

Thus, reducing Poland’s large and ongoing trade deficit with Russia has become a major priority for Warsaw in Polish and Russian economic ties. It is hoped that investment projects in Kaliningrad could provide a mechanism to significantly reduce Poland’s negative trade balance with Russia. In 2002, some progress was made on reducing the trade imbalance between Russia and Poland.

Despite the cool political relations between Moscow and Warsaw through most of the 1990s, economic relations between the countries were normal. Indeed, Russia and Poland collaborated on a multi-billion dollar natural gas pipeline project, the Yamal-Europe line, which transported Siberian gas through Belarus and Poland to Germany. There were also discussions surrounding the possible construction of a second Yamal natural gas pipeline bypass link to circumvent Ukraine and its valuable pipeline to Europe.<sup>15</sup> Poland initially rebuffed these Russian overtures being concerned about their impact on Ukraine a strategic partner and friendly neighbor. Later Poland showed some interest in pursuing this second pipeline project but financing was problematic and Ukraine made some concessions to Russia on a transit agreement and agreed to the creation of an international gas consortium to modernize and manage Ukraine’s gas pipelines. However, Poland was able to negotiate a 34.5 percent reduction in the gas supplies it was committed to buy from Russia’s GAZPROM from 2003-2020 saving an estimated \$5 billion.<sup>16</sup>

13 Central Statistical Office, “Maly Rocznik Statystyczny Polski” *Concise Statistical Yearbook of Poland*, Warsaw, 2002, p. 370.

14 Central Statistical Office, respective additions of *Rocznik Statystyczny Handlu Zagranicznego, Yearbook of Foreign Trade Statistics*, Warsaw, 1998, p. 62; 2000, p. 67; 2001, p. 72 and *Polish Market*, 8 Ministry of Economy, <http://www.polishmarket.com.pl/artukul.php?id=1944>.

15 *CDPSP*, vol. 52, no. 43, November 22, 2000, pp. 21-22.

16 “Poland Cuts Gazprom Deliveries,” *The Moscow Times*, February 13, 2003. The accord also extended the agreement to 2022, which reduced the overall gas supply reduction to 26.2 percent as noted in “Opposition Wants to Sue Deputy Premier for Gas Deal with Russia,” *Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine Report*, 18 March 2003, <http://www.rferl.org/pbureport/2003/03/10-180303.html>.

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For its part, Russia wanted Poland and Ukraine's cooperation to maximize its energy linkage with Europe.

### Political Relations

Throughout most of the 1990s, Russian and Polish political relations were cool and strained. Poland's desire to join NATO as fast as possible was resented by Russia. Despite gestures and efforts at reconciliation by Gorbachev and Yeltsin, Russian leaders found it difficult to deal with the historical and psychological legacy of animosity and distrust.<sup>17</sup> During a visit to Warsaw in August 1993, President Yeltsin agreed that Poland's decision to join NATO was its sovereign right.<sup>18</sup> Yet, strong opposition by the Russian military and Foreign Ministry caused Yeltsin and Russian authorities to back away from that position. No Russian president would visit Poland again for over eight years, which highlighted the coldness in political relations. Although President Kwasniewski made several visits to Moscow to maintain high-level political ties.

The thaw in Russian and Polish relations occurred during President Putin's tenure as President. As noted earlier, bilateral relations had hit rock bottom in the winter due to the spy scandal and Chechen protests in Poland. While Poland had sought good political relations with Moscow for years to reassure Russia and facilitate Poland's accession to NATO and the European Union, Russia finally decided it was time to significantly improve political ties with Poland. A visit by Polish President Kwasniewski to Moscow in July 2000, about three months ahead of Poland's presidential elections, timed to coincide with the Russia and Poland Economic Forum played a key role in stimulating the thaw in Russian and Polish relations.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly enough, 2000 was the 60th year anniversary of the Katyn massacre, wherein 21,857 Poles' including military officers and civilians were executed by the Soviet secret police, the NKVD, on Stalin's orders.<sup>20</sup> The opening of memorial in Katyn, near Smolensk in Russia, on 28 July 2000, provided a historic and symbolic context to improve bilateral relations. Several months earlier, Putin had telephoned President Kwasniewski to inform him that some new burial sites of Katyn victims were found and the Poles were invited to partake in the excavation operation.

During 2001, several high-level Russian officials visited Warsaw, including Russian Prime Minister Kasyanov. This signified a warming of political relations. Finally, in January 2002, President Putin made a high-profile two-day visit to Poland that was described as ushering in a new stage in Russian-Polish relations.<sup>21</sup> The leaders signed several agreements during Putin's visit and both sides pledged to deepen their economic and political ties. Despite the warm reception for Putin's visit, no major breakthroughs occurred at this summit. Since then, political ties have become warmer and meetings between the respective prime ministers have become frequent and institutionalized. These improved political relations are expected to further deepen economic and cultural relations as well.

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17 Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, Translated by Catherine A. Fitzpatrick (New York: Times Books, 1994), p. 138 and Mikhail Gorbachev, *Memoirs* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 465-466. Gorbachev noted that: The inertia of paternalism made itself felt for a long time.

18 *CDPSP*, Vol. 45, No.36, October 6, 1993, pp. 17-18 and *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 45, No. 34, September 22, 1993, pp. 20-21.

19 "Kwasniewski Declares Success after Russia Visit," *The Warsaw Voice*, July 16, 2000, No. 29 (612).

20 *CDPSP*, Vol. 44, No. 42, Nov. 18, 1992; *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press*, Vol. 52, No. 16, May 17, 2000, pp. 22-23; and Brian Crozier, "Remembering Katyn," *Hoover Digest 2000*, No. 2, <http://www-hoover.stanford.edu/publications/digest/002crozier.html>.

21 Official Visit of President of the Russian Federation-State Dinner at the Presidential Palace (2000-01-16), [http://www.president.pl/ser/index.php3?tem\\_ID=3710&kategoria=Last month](http://www.president.pl/ser/index.php3?tem_ID=3710&kategoria=Last%20month).

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Why did Putin decide that it was time to improve political relations with Warsaw? Several reasons can be cited. By now Russia had digested and acclimated itself to Poland's NATO membership. Given Russia's own improved relations with NATO after September 11, 2001 and Putin's desire for good relations with the European Union, it made sense to improve relations with those organizations' most significant eastern member, Poland.<sup>22</sup> That was seen as useful in addressing the topic of Kaliningrad and European Union based visas and for communicating Russia's security concerns. Increasingly, Putin saw Poland as a bridge to the West, rather than as a disloyal former ally who changed sides.

### **Cultural Relations and Public Opinion**

Tensions between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Vatican throughout the 1990s and beyond have been an irritant in Russian-Polish relations as well. The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) accuses the Catholic Church of proselytizing and encroaching on its traditional territory and objects to the loss of various churches in western Ukraine to the Ukrainian Catholics. The Vatican responds by invoking freedom of religion and notes that the restoration of Ukrainian Catholic churches undid the damage caused by Stalin's banning of the Ukrainian Catholic Church during the 1940s. Pope John Paul II paid a historic visit to Ukraine in June 2001, a visit that was strongly opposed by the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, Patriarch Alexei II.<sup>23</sup>

The Russian Patriarch also objected to the Pope's hoped for stop-over visit to Kazan in Russia, to return an important Orthodox icon on his planned trip to Mongolia in 2003. Pope John Paul II has been very interested in visiting Russia to promote ecumenicalism. Given his Slavic background, failing health, and advancing age, a historic papal visit to Moscow would be a fitting zenith for the Pope's many international travels. For more than a decade, however, the Russian Orthodox Church leaders have indicated that a visit by Pope John Paul II is premature until various contentious issues between the churches are resolved.<sup>24</sup>

By contrast, Russia's top political leaders, including Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin, have favored a papal visit to Russia. In February 2002, the Vatican's upgrading of the provisional dioceses in Russia to the status of full permanent dioceses led to strong reactions by the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government.<sup>25</sup> The Russian Orthodox Church saw this action as a provocation involving encroachment, proselytizing, and with no consultation. Subsequently, a Polish Catholic Bishop and five priests from abroad, including several Polish citizens, were denied visas with no explanation. Since the Catholic Church in Russia relies heavily on foreign priests some 85 percent a systematic policy of visa denial could seriously harm the Church's survival.<sup>26</sup>

Russia and Polish relations are affected by the Russian Orthodox Church and Vatican quarrels given the Russian state's close relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church and Poland's strong Catholic faith and the pope's Polish nationality. Although Russia is a secular state, the size, political clout, and historic and cultural ties of the Russian Orthodox Church make it the favored denomination in Russia. While Putin has favored a papal visit to Russia, he has also sided with the Russian Orthodox Church in its dispute with the Vatican.<sup>27</sup>

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22 As President Kwasniewski states: "The eastern dimension of E.U. policy may become a Polish specialty. It is internationally appreciated for this, by the United States, NATO, and E.U. countries." "Getting the Priorities Straight," *The Warsaw Voice* (on line), January 30, 2003.

23 *CDPSP*, Vol. 53, No. 26, July 25, 2001, pp.1-5.

24 *CDPSP*, Vol. 50, No. 6, March 11, 1998, p. 22.

25 Judy Augsburg, "Russia Moves on Catholic Priests," <http://www.msnbc.com/news/806083.asp?Osi=->.

26 *Ibid.*

27 "Nyet for the Catholic Church," *The Warsaw Voice*, April 28-May 5, 2002, No.17/18 (706/706).



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The visa denials by Russian authorities provide clear evidence that the Russian state supports the Russian Orthodox Church. While this pro-Russian Orthodox Church policy seems incongruous to Putin's improved relations with Poland and the West, it represents a concession to an important and politically influential domestic institution, one whose support Putin needs. Given the Vatican's international clout, one might expect Putin to seek ways to ease the Orthodox and Catholic dispute especially after his expected re-election. While Russian and Polish governmental relations have noticeably improved during the Putin years, public opinion still seems to conspicuously lag behind. The legacy of a troubled history as well the religious tensions combine to fuel negative feelings and stereotypes on both sides. A Polish public opinion survey done in January 2003 cited Russia as Poland's greatest enemy, followed by Germany, Belarus, and Iraq.<sup>28</sup> On the other hand, other public opinion surveys indicate Polish perceptions of Russia and the Russians are improving and becoming less hostile.<sup>29</sup> Not unexpectedly, in these polls the older generation are more negative than the younger generation.

### **Conclusion**

Russian and Polish relations have a long and troubled history, but those relations have significantly improved during the Putin era. As Russia has increasingly become more pragmatic and pro-Western it has come to terms with Poland's integration with the West. Indeed, Poland is seen increasingly as a useful bridge between Russia and the West. Poland's prospective role as the most important member from the east and an expert on the east within NATO and the European Union makes Poland especially important for Russia. For its part, Poland sought good relations with Russia to enhance its sense of regional security not only from military threats but also from terrorism, organized crime, and the influx of illegal immigrants; and to promote its economic interests. While making membership in NATO and the European Union its top foreign policy priorities, Poland has wanted to reassure Russia of its desire for friendly bilateral relations. While overcoming the legacy of mutual distrust and animosity will take decades, bilateral relations between Russia and Poland should remain friendly so long as Russia continues a pragmatic and pro-Western foreign policy. Given Russia's desire to develop a market economy and moves towards democracy, and the need to address its economic and military weaknesses, a pragmatic and pro-Western foreign policy is in Russia's best interests.

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28 "Survey Suggests Russia is Poland's Greatest Enemy," *Russia Today*, 2/6/2003, <http://www.rosbaltnews.com/print/print?cn=61279>.

29 "Do Poles Really View Russia As an Enemy?" *Russia Today*, 2/24/2003, <http://www.rosbaltnews.com/print/print?cn+61503>.