

## **The Influence of History upon Politics: The Case of Türkiye and Poland**

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Countries with strong historical consciousness and long political traditions often have to adapt their strategy to be able to face contemporary challenges. But even in the postmodern, information-oriented world, experience (even a bitter one) may be an advantage and not a burden.

Foreign policy of both Poland and Türkiye is influenced by historical factor, that is to say by how these countries behaved in the past responding to challenges posed to them by their international environment. Facts from the past as well as their interpretations are quite naturally a part of the mental maps of societies and political elites and thus affect their perception of international reality and decision-making process.

But historical patterns of political conduct have their very objective reasons. Although it may seem insignificant from the point of view of certain international relations theories (e.g. Realist theory), the fact is that decisions in politics are made by humans conditioned by both their personal emotions as well as collective emotions of the public opinion of which their political position depends. This fact acknowledged, it may be useful to demonstrate a few parallels between the two countries, the ones that influence their perception of international relations the most.

Both Poland and Türkiye are located in geopolitically active regions of the world, on the crossroads where numerous and often contradictory interests interact with each other on different levels. Finding itself inside a 'crash zone' imposes a need of constant reaction to external forces of a local, regional and global nature, which themselves change their own vector and character depending on the actual balance of power, that in turn, may sometimes have very little to do with the situation in those specific regions. To make it clear by an example: the politics of USA towards Russia in Central Europe which has direct consequences to Poland depends strongly on Washington's aims towards Germany or France. This results in a situation in which both Ankara and Warsaw are obliged to calculate their foreign policy strategy basing not only on the national interests but also by taking into account forces which they can hardly shape let alone control, enforcing an extreme flexibility and frequent trade-offs between the two, the ones that often are difficult to accept by the internal public opinion.

As a result of its geopolitical location, both countries experience an intense external pressure effectuated by great powers whose interests are directly present in respective regions or projected on them. Both are too big to consider itself a small country and too small to be a great power capable of carrying politics fully independent from external influence. This specific situation results in an attempt to balance the impact of bigger players, which constitutes a major characteristic of both Polish and Turkish foreign policy, making the extent, forms and ultimate aims of their participation in wider alliances (EU for Poland, NATO for Türkiye) a subject for discussion, to say the least. In another words, to my opinion, both countries share a historically motivated fear of being instrumentalized by great powers using their membership in formal alliances to impose their informal interests to junior partners.

Both countries for a major part of their political history used to be great powers that hold control over their respective regions in a way that may not be accurately classified as one of imperial or colonial nature. Both Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Ottoman Empire were created, integrated and made persistent by motives (common external threats) and factors (e.g., culture, religion) different than Western colonial empires driven by purely expansionist desire of exploitation pursued by military means. It may be difficult to see it from the perspective of post-nationalist era where criteria changed in comparison to 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century, but both countries don't see its rule over the regions in colonial terms but rather as an optimal (the best available) formula of coexistence of nations that both states included. This is true especially when seen through the lenses of the fact, that after Poland and Turkey were partitioned, majority of those nations were not granted independence but included into other imperia, either directly or as their satellites.

As a result of historical process, both Poland and Türkiye are surrounded by countries much smaller both in terms of physical size and political influence and this disproportion results in a certain tension: on one hand, Warsaw and Ankara see themselves as natural leaders of its regions, on the other, this view is not always shared by the supposed junior partners who often take unconstructive stance and seek for an external balance, that is to say, encourage great powers to interfere into regional affairs. This dynamic gets even more complicated given the fact, that many of those countries (Ukraine and Belarus for Poland, Syria, Iraq and Armenia for Türkiye) are in a situation of permanent internal crisis with unclear decision-making processes and fluctuating (if any at all) strategic priorities. Being a source of potential risks for their own population internally and surrounding region externally, those small neighbours often show

unreadiness to accept a regional leader, which result in a negative synergy that traditionally constitutes a periodically problematic factor for both Warsaw and Ankara.

Those are the factors that, in my opinion, historically had and still have the greatest impact on Polish and Turkish perception of their international environment and this due to the fact that geography is something one can hardly change. Poland and Türkiye find themselves in a paradoxical situation created by the fact, that on one hand, a strong national state is the sole guarantee of surviving in a complicated international environment, and on the other, almost any effort to make it stronger may easily provoke a negative international reaction from above (great powers) and from the bottom (smaller neighbours) therefore creating a seemingly unsolvable dilemma, a contradiction in itself.

Does this trap have an exit? Yes, and the answer is hidden in both countries' historical experience which suggests not to stick dogmatically to an 'ideal' vision of itself and its geopolitical environment but rather elaborate flexible proposals without enforcing them abroad risking to face destructive opposition. To concentrate on pragmatic projects rather than ideological visions and wait for the potential partners to follow. In another words: to invent (for example a Pan-Turkic idea or the *Intermarium* project) or build (for example: a tremendous transit airport, that both of them are constructing right now) something on your own and wait until your international entourage starts to internalize the fact that being a neighbour of Poland or Türkiye is profitable. Because the second face of the seemingly fatalistic nature of being located in pivotal regions of the world is, that the situation of your neighbours may very fast change in a way that they will need a regional leader and thus the niche for a 'middle power' will arise naturally by the force of circumstances.

To give an example: from the functional point of view, Armenia is for Türkiye what Belarus is for Poland with parallels getting closer these days as president Lukashenko announces his readiness to directly attack Ukraine<sup>1</sup> but both of them may very soon have no better option than to stick to the regional leader. Therefore, if 'difficult' partners need time, so let it be until circumstances persuade them to perceive Warsaw's or Ankara's proposals as optimal. Another example: both Poland and Türkiye are perceived by the USA as instruments to handle American interests in respective regions. But with rising tensions with China or Russia on a global level, Washington may very soon incline to treat them as indispensable partners on regional level,

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<sup>1</sup> [Belarus's Lukashenko warns Ukraine, deploys troops with Russia | Reuters](#)

with a genuine decision-making autonomy, something that both of them were unsuccessfully trying to achieve for years.

And the very reason for that is, that countries which exist in their own regions for multiple centuries know those regions best (and certainly better than the relatively young superpower located at the other edge of the globe) proving that historically formed mental maps work better than theoretical constructions invented at the universities (even the best ones) far away. In the 'No One's World'<sup>2</sup>, where great powers are often either unable or unwilling to solve major regional problems constructively without destroying the existing order, the emerging regional powers may have an important stabilizing role to play. The one they already played in the history and reminding this fact is not a question of a sentimental megalomania but of a pure pragmatism.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *No One's World: The West, the Rising Rest, and the Coming Global Turn*, Oxford University Press, 2013