

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Normative Counterfactual of Poland's Foreign Policy Toward Ukraine

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Abstract

This paper presents a counterfactual of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine since it became a sovereign state. This thought experiment states an alternative history of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine and starts with the question, 'What if Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine was strategically aimed at buck-passing the costs of our common security and possibly even bloodletting our neighbor through the conflict with Russia?'. The argument starts with the examination of normative theory and analyticism as the meta-theoretical underpinnings of the analysis. Then, the concepts of thought experiment and counterfactual will be introduced, showing how they can be helpful in understanding this particular nexus of causal and normative concerns. The national interests of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia will be reconstructed and used as the backdrop for normative analysis. Furthermore, buck-passing, bait, bleed, and bloodletting foreign policy strategies are introduced to structure the proposed counterfactual. Finally, the counterfactual is constructed and its normative and empirical/causal consequences are assessed in the conclusion of the paper.

Keywords

realism, normative theory, counterfactual, Poland, Ukraine, buck passing, bait and bleed

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The second factor, albeit weaker, would be the difficulty for Russia in coping with the fact that Ukraine broke off from her. This country plays a huge role in the economy of Russia, and in addition to being strongly connected to the Russian psyche, it is impossible to imagine the situation in which the Soviets would come to terms with that loss. Additionally, on the whole length of the Russo-Ukrainian border, there would be incessant territorial disputes fuelled by the existence of the Donetsk industrial district and other regions.

– Adolf Bocheński, *Zagadnienie polsko-ukraińskie* [circa 1937]¹

In the time of informational warfare, state-sponsored internet troll farms and exposition-hungry media quoting selectively to monetize public emotions, it is important to state the aim of this paper clearly. It is to provide an alternative history of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine and to use this thought experiment to elucidate and lay bare certain normative aspects of it, as relevant to what the author understands as Poland's national interests. This, in turn, provides a systematic normative and political-ethical insight into the real world practice of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine and its possible course in the future. The author wants to emphasize that to the best of his knowledge, Poland's foreign policy was not aimed at 'bloodletting Russia through Ukrainian hands' – Poland did not have the power, capabilities nor motivation to pursue such a policy. Even though, from a certain neorealist perspective, one may indeed perceive the current Russo-Ukrainian war as a conflict in which both sides expand a lot of their capabilities which leads to the rise of Poland's relative power in relation to combatants, this situation is an example of the emergent and 'overdetermined' quality of international reality not the result of a conscious strategy of whichever actors are involved.

Ukraine was a contentious issue during the debate between two major candidates for the 2025 election of the president of Poland, Karol Nawrocki (Law and Justice) and Rafał Trzaskowski (Civic Platform). The former, who eventually won the election, claimed that Poland was being mistreated by authorities in Kiev, while the latter countered that this is a kind of argument that Putin could have made.² Nawrocki, as president elect, did not mince his words about Ukrainian responsibility for Volhynian genocide of Polish citizens, which worries Ukrainian officials and analysts alike – the feeling in Kiev is that the head of Poland is no longer a friend and champion of Ukraine, as was the case for the former President Andrzej Duda.³ The

¹ J. Kęsik, *Idea niepodległej Ukrainy w świetle studium Adolfa Bocheńskiego pt. Zagadnienie polsko-ukraińskie* (Wrocław: Instytut Historyczny UW, 1997), 173, <https://repozytorium.uni.wroc.pl/en/dlibra/publication/118911/edition/116506/idea-niepodleglej-ukrainy-w-swietle-studium-adolfa-bochenskigo-pt-zagadnienie-polsko-ukrainskie-kesik-jan>.

² "Debata Trzaskowski kontra Nawrocki. Na tapecie Ukraina, "ustawki" i kłamstwa | Polska Agencja Prasowa SA," *Polska Agencja Prasowa SA*, May 24, 2025, <https://www.pap.pl/aktualnosci/debata-trzaskowski-i-nawrocki-min-o-ukrainie-ale-takze-o-ustawkach-i-polswiatku-opis2>.

³ R. Szoszyn, "Ukraińcy zaniepokojeni. "Czasy proukraińskiego prezydenta w Polsce dobiegają końca"," *Rzeczpospolita*, May 19, 2025, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art42315351-ukraincy-zaniepokojeni-czasy-proukrainskiego-prezydenta-w-polsce-dobiegaja-konca>.

Russo-Ukrainian War still rages. With the uncertain military help from the USA headed by a peculiar president and administration generally unfriendly toward Ukraine's cause, and the EU still ramping up the military production to fill the possible gaps, Poland's support seems crucial as ever for Kiev. With calls for a more transactional approach in Poland's foreign policy toward its beleaguered neighbour present in the public discourse, both from politicians and experts,⁴ the nature of the support is in a state of flux. In this context, it is important to realistically analyze the nature of the relationship and underlying interests of both parties.

The present paper aims to contribute to the discussion of Polish-Ukrainian relations in the context of Russia's war of aggression and Poland's foreign policy. The author will present what he calls a normative counterfactual of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine since 1989. The main underlying quality of the counterfactual would be that Poland since the fall of communism has been applying buck-passing and, later, bait and bleed strategy that 'graduated' to bloodletting, aimed at antagonizing Ukraine toward Russia and baiting the bigger country into attacking its smaller neighbour by influencing the pro-Western direction of Ukraine and finally supporting it so that it can deplete its own and Russian capabilities. The counterfactual will help with two tasks: showing the normative consequences of the potential ultra-transactional foreign policy of Poland and general problems with the strategic dimension of its foreign policy.

The argument presented will start with the cursory examination of normative theory and analyticism as the meta-theoretical underpinnings of the whole analysis. Then, the concepts of thought experiment and counterfactual will be introduced, showing how they can be helpful in understanding this particular nexus of causal and normative concerns. The structures of the national interests of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia will be reconstructed and used as the backdrop of the normative analysis. Furthermore, the ideal types of buck-passing, bait and bleed, and bloodletting foreign policy strategies are introduced to structure the proposed counterfactual. Finally, the counterfactual is constructed and its normative and empirical/causal consequences are assessed in the conclusion of the paper.

Analyticism, normative theory and counterfactuals as thought experiments

Quincy Wight's old provocation seems no longer relevant,⁵ as international theory is well present in mainstream IR publications.⁶ Dealing with timeless questions of

⁴ P. Musiałek, "Relacje z Ukrainą uratuje tylko transakcyjność," *Klub Jagielloński*, October 3, 2023, <https://klubjagiellonski.pl/2023/10/03/relacje-z-ukraina-uratuje-tylko-transakcyjnosc/>; "“Powinniśmy mieć bardziej transakcyjne podejście. Oczekiwać coś za coś”. Bosak o dalszym pomaganiu Ukrainie," *300polityka*, February 25, 2025, <https://300polityka.pl/live/2025/02/25/powinnismy-miec-bardziej-transakcyjne-podejscie-oczekiwac-cos-za-cos-bosak-o-dalszym-pomaganiu-ukrainie/>.

⁵ M. Wight, "Why is there no International Theory?," *International Relations* 2, no. 1 (1960): 35–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004711786000200104>.

⁶ A.F. Lang, *International Political Theory* (Macmillan Education UK, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-46180-3>; K.E. Jørgensen, *International Relations Theory* (Macmillan Education UK, 2018), 41–65, <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-60447-7>.

international order, qualities of international politics and law, problems of war and peace international theory approaches, these value-laden problems with means of logic, analysis of classical texts, and considerations of normative, even moral, aspects of international reality. In a sense, research in the field of international theory comes close to what Hedley Bull termed the classical approach to international relations.⁷ The problem with this approach is that it often resembles a history of ideas or conceptual history, with its strong focus on the exegesis of classical texts with little room for consideration for their contemporary relevance. Since the aim of this paper is to provide normative analysis relevant for the contemporary foreign policy of Poland, it is relevant to refer to normative theory category as developed by Dorota Pietrzyk-Reeves, in her own words: ‘(...) the latter [normative theory – MFS] proposes goals and standards that should be achieved, or at least are desirable even if they cannot be achieved at the moment. Political theories provide a set of concepts or propositions that explain political phenomena on the one hand and, on the other, normative principles for ordering political communities. (...) All our concepts cannot simply “describe” reality; they also provide meaning to the social world of facts, values, norms, patterns, standards. Therefore, apart from descriptive arguments formulated by empirically minded political scientists there are also evaluative or prescriptive arguments formulated by theorists who are concerned with justification of norms’.⁸

The above description of normative theory complements the other metatheoretical inspiration of this text – analyticism. The term was coined by Patric Jackson as part of his ideal typology of metatheories present in the discipline of IR. It is the approach that involves its practitioner in the social reality that they want to understand. This monistic disposition is married to concerns about the practicality of international political knowledge – the subject of knowing should be able to exert their own judgment about matters, making it relevant from the perspective of their own values. The main vehicle of the analyticist approach is an ideal type, a relevant utopia condensing the real-world qualities of a given matter into a form that can be normatively applied to reality and felicitates for the subject of knowing the making sense of it. This sense-making activity leads to practical judgments based on the subject’s own values, which are relevant to political action.⁹ The counterfactual, which is the centerpiece of the arguments herein, should be viewed precisely as one such ideal type.

⁷ H. Bull, “International Theory: The Case for a Classical Approach,” *World Politics* 18, no. 3 (1966), <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009761>.

⁸ D. Pietrzyk-Reeves, “Normative Political Theory,” *Teoria Polityki* 1 (2017): 177, <https://doi.org/10.4467/00000000tp.17.009.6588>.

⁹ P.T. Jackson, *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (Routledge, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203843321>; See also my text waiting to be published in *Politeja*: M. Filary-Szczepanik, “Ku dialogicznemu pluralizmowi w nauce o stosunkach międzynarodowych – o roli, substancji i konsekwencjach podstaw metateoretycznych w praktyce badawczej,” *Politeja*, 2025 (forthcoming).

The 'what if...' question seems to be the essence of the counterfactual as a thought experiment. Posing such questions seems to be in vogue at least since the beginning of the XXI century, a situation owed in part to Niall Ferguson's provocative publication.¹⁰ The modern idea of a thought experiment can be traced to Ernst Mach's *gedankenexperiment* and it has a contentious literature about it. The usage of 'What ifs' can be also traced to Max Weber, among others. They have, in common with other types of thought experiments, the quality that facilitates the coherent explanation of the relevant phenomena.¹¹ To put it in simple terms: 'To draw a conclusion on the basis of a *thought experiment* is to make a judgment about what would happen if the particular state of affairs described in some imaginary scenarios were actually to obtain.'¹² A very good description of how to make a counterfactual that will be followed in this text can be found in Joseph Nye's textbook on international conflict. Nye emphasizes four qualities of a good counterfactual: 1) plausibility – although counterfactuals are a creative endeavor, one should not introduce events that clearly could not happen or are outlandish in some other aspect; 2) proximity in time – we can speculate about the consequences of sea peoples conquering Egypt at the late bronze period, but extending the consequences of such an event to the particulars of XIX century European politics is stretching it too much; 3) relation to theory – 'what ifs' should follow some well known theoretical generalization that gives such counterfactual its structure; 4) facts – the intellectual operation of creating a counterfactual should closely follow what we know about the event that actually happened.¹³

Let us finalize this section of the argument by properly stating the 'what if' of the author's counterfactual and covering the four aspects introduced by Nye. The core of this normative thought experiment is the question: 'What if Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine was strategically aimed at buck-passing the costs of our common security and possibly even bloodletting our neighbor through the conflict with Russia?'. Is this plausible? Contemporary conflict causes both Russia and Ukraine expand a lot of capabilities. As much as Poland is not directly affected by the war and suffers 'only' hybrid warfare from Russian and Belarusian covert assets¹⁴ and

¹⁰ N. Ferguson, *Virtual History* (Pan Books, 2003).

¹¹ J. Reiss, "Thought Experiments in Economics and the role of Coherent Explanations," *Studia Metodologiczne* 36 (2016): 114, 120.

¹² T. Gendler, *Thought Experiment: On the Powers and Limits of Imaginary Cases* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 34.

¹³ J.S. Nye, *Understanding International Conflicts* (Longman, 2006), 51–54.

¹⁴ A. Bilal, "NATO Review - Russia's hybrid war against the West," *NATO Review*, April 26, 2024, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2024/04/26/russias-hybrid-war-against-the-west/index.html>; EEAS, "Hybrid threats/Russia: Statement by the High Representative on behalf of the EU condemning Russia's persistent hybrid campaigns against the EU, its Member States and partners," July 21, 2025, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/ukraine/hybrid-threats-russia-statement-high-representative-behalf-eu-condemning-russia's-persistent-hybrid_en.

costs of the migration weaponized by those authoritarian regimes,¹⁵ the relative power of Poland rises vis-à-vis both Russia and Ukraine. The plausibility question will be explored in more depth in the conclusion after the counterfactual is presented. The proximity in time is very close and the relevance of the thought experiment is high for the contemporary foreign policy of Poland. It poses its own unique challenges, as the counterfactual is much less about causation and much more about normative consequences of the ‘what if.’ As for the relation to theory, a general approach will be taken from Morgenthau’s classical realist tradition with an analysis of the national interests of Poland, Russia, and Ukraine; the general qualities of balance of power; and from the offensive variant of structural realism with concepts of buck-passing, bait and bleed and bloodletting taken from Mearsheimer’s *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*.¹⁶ The facts used in the counterfactual will be general and well-known events of international politics as relevant to the region of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), particularly Poland’s foreign policy toward Ukraine since 1989.

Hierarchies of national interest’s, foreign policy of buck-passing and bait and bleed

The point of departure and the most basic assumption needed for the counterfactual are the hierarchies of the national interests of Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. The hierarchy takes into consideration one of the most basic tenants of realist thinking, namely the primacy of survival, here more as the survival of a particular political community akin to classical realist thinking, not the formal motivational assumption from structural realism.¹⁷ Furthermore, the following reconstruction is what the author believes to be the relevant interests of all parties as they are, not as they should be. The hierarchy consists of three layers: 1) security/survival, 2) economic interests relevant to state power, and 3) domestic political/societal interests. In the case of the Poland-Ukraine dyad, the divergence of these interests will also be considered (as there is little need to argue about how divergent the Russian interests are from those of the two former states).

1. Security/survival interests – sovereign and prosperous (powerful) Ukraine means that Russia is weaker in relation to Poland. It is due to the fact that Ukrainian capabilities are not at the disposal of Russian state and it needs to take into consideration more difficult geostrategic position for its power projection potential toward the west. Poland borders only the Kaliningrad exclave, not the main

¹⁵ A. Dyrer, *NATO Countries Respond to Russia’s Instrumentalisation of Migration* (PISM, 2024).

¹⁶ H. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The struggle for Power and Peace* (McGraw-Hill Education, 2005[1948]); H. Morgenthau, *In Defense of the National Interest: A Critical Examination of American Foreign Policy* (Knopf, 1951); J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (Norton & Company, Incorporated, W. W., 2002).

¹⁷ M. Filary-Szczepanik, *Anarchia i dyscyplina Rzecz o realistycznych teoriach stosunków międzynarodowych Hansa Morgenthaua i Kennetha Waltza* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Akademii Ignatianum w Krakowie, 2019), 304–319, 342–371.

body of Russian territory. Thus, sovereign Ukraine with pro-Western government and foreign policy orientation is in Poland's national interest. Here, Poland and Ukraine's interests are the most convergent, but the question should be raised whether they are identical. Poland wanted its neighbor as a buffer state or as a trip wire for Russian revisionism, while Ukraine wanted security, prosperity, and freedom for itself.

2. Economic interests: These are divergent. Both countries are producers of food, but because of better conditions, agriculture in Ukraine is more efficient than in Poland. Poland is an important provider of logistics services in the EU common market – Ukraine would compete for that niche if it joined the EU. Similarly, the manufacturing sectors of both countries are in direct competition when it comes to the common EU market. If Poland can be perceived as Germany's 'semi-periphery,' to use Marxist parlance, Ukraine might supplant Poland in that role and stop it from reaching the core state status in the European political economy. This raises the question of whether Ukraine as Poland's semi-periphery is in the interest of the latter. If the answer is yes, the divergence of economic interests between the two states is even greater. A good indicator for this would be the role of Poland in the future rebuilding of Ukraine. Still, the main issue here is whether the economic costs of Ukraine's accession to common European market will jeopardize Poland's military buildup. If that were the case, the importance of the divergence of economic interests would be even greater.
3. Political/societal interests: The issue of the Volhynian genocide during World War II. Poland wanted the exhumation of its victims and expiation from Ukraine. For Ukraine, perpetrators are often viewed as national heroes fighting for Ukrainian nationhood. The issue is souring their bilateral relations, as both countries regained their full independence from Russia. The issue is especially important in the context of the contemporary Russo-Ukrainian war, as Poland sees it as an opportunity to push its hisotrico-political agenda on its neighbour, which is in existential crisis and dependent on its help. For Ukraine, the problem is that the perpetrators of the genocide and their fight for Ukrainian nationhood and independence are a source of positive mobilization of its society needed to fight the Russians. Here, the interests of both countries appear to be the most divergent. Their potential, or actual¹⁸ clash is not beneficial for either party, as it gives easy ammunition for Russian propaganda and information warfare assets.

¹⁸ E. Flieger, "Karol Nawrocki Wynałazł Koło? Jak Rozwiązać Problem Banderowskich Symboli," *Rzeczpospolita*, October 4, 2025, <https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art43108401-karol-nawrocki-wynalazl-kolo-jak-rozwi-azac-problem-banderowskich-symboli>; M. Fornusek, "Ukraine Hits Back at Polish President over Comments on 'Premature' EU, NATO Talks," *The Kyiv Independent*, September 9, 2025, <https://kyivindependent.com/ukraine-hits-back-at-polish-president-over-comments-on-premature-nato-eu-talks>.

Since the counterfactual is being constructed in the context of Russian interests, there is a need to elaborate on it as well. What is different from the first two countries is the lack of distinction between security/survival interests and political interests.

1. Security/survival and political/societal interests – The continuation of Putin and his kleptocratic elites' rule through the creation and sustenance of the imperial needs of Russian people; Ukraine as a vassal state or plainly incorporated back into Russia and Poland firmly within the Russian sphere of influence, or at least reasonably fearing and deferent toward Russia.
2. Economic interests: Ukraine under Moscow's thumb is an occasion to distribute the spoils among Putin's cronies; it does not pose any difficulties for the transfer of Russian oil and gas to Europe. Poland's deference to Russian interests will not create problems in the EU for Russian energetic resource trade.

The final categories needed for the construction of the counterfactual are the buck-passing,¹⁹ bait and bleed²⁰ strategies of the foreign policy. Both are foreign policy strategies conducted in the context of anarchical and self-help systems of international politics. In their simplest versions, both are systems with three actors: Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. They differ first in that in the former case, it is more about deterrence and, in the latter, it is about open conflict. The second difference lies in the type of relationship between the actors. In buck-passing, it is an uneasy alliance of two against one, whereas in bait and bleed, none of the three have any formal alliance ties. The third difference is in the logic of motivation: in buck-passing, the two allied states have a defensive status quo disposition vis-à-vis an imperialist, revisionist power; in bait and bleed, all three actors are motivated to maximize their relative power.

Buck passing can take place in a situation where two weaker states are allied to balance the third state perceived by them as threatening, usually because it is more powerful than either of the two. As a foreign policy strategy, it involves the moves to make the other allied party cover a bigger part of the costs of common security. This happens when both allied states try to dissuade the third form of aggression toward either of them. There are three problematic issues in this concept: 1) the determination by either of them of the capabilities of other actors in the triad; 2) the final success of

¹⁹ Introduced by B. Posen in 1986, this category has a large, also contemporary literature, see e.g. B. Posen, *The Sources of Military Doctrine: France, Britain, and Germany Between the World Wars* (Cornell University Press, 1984); B. Valeriano, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Testing Aggressive Power Politics Models," *International Interactions* 35, no. 2 (May 20, 2009): 179–206, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03050620902864493>; M. Richey, "Buck-Passing, Chain-Ganging and Alliances in the Multipolar Indo-Asia-Pacific," *The International Spectator* 55, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2019.1706390>; In my reconstruction I will use mostly J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 157–162.

²⁰ Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 153, 154.

the free riding – will the ally have big enough potential to deter the would-be aggressor; and 3) the probability of the situation where the ally actually bears the burden of common security, which depends on the differences in threat perception of the potential aggressor by both defensive states.

Bloodletting is a consequence of the extension of the bait and bleed foreign policy strategy. Since the states tend to maximize their relative power, if in a particular region of at least three states, two of them fight a war and bear its costs, the third country gains relative power vis-à-vis them because it does not bear the costs of the conflict. Situations in which a state is able to successfully start a war between its two neighbors are indeed rare, but if the war is happening for other reasons, for the purpose of bloodletting, the weaker side of the conflict should be supported, as the longer the war lasts, the more capabilities both combatants expend. The problems with this strategy are as follows: 1) If one of the warring states decisively wins and profits from it, the baiter might be in a worse power position than it was before the conflict; and 2) to what extent should the weaker side be helped, as it does not win decisively with the consequence as in the first point?; 3) in absolute terms, how big costs can the baiter/bleader expend for the benefit of the weaker side of the conflict, especially in the case of a liberal democratic state—how much can their societies watch the carnage without losing its own morale?

The counterfactual

Before the body of the counterfactual, it is important to restate its composition, purpose and factual status. What is presented below is a thought experiment that presents an alternative history of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine. The main feature of this intellectual exercise is to answer the hypothetical question: 'What if Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine was strategically aimed at buck-passing the costs of our common security and possibly even bloodletting our neighbor through the conflict with Russia?'. The reconstruction is done by the arrangement and interpretation of the well known facts relevant to the history of mutual relations between Poland and Ukraine so that they fit the theoretical concepts of bait and bleed and bloodletting foreign policy archetypes. Hence, the author does not believe that the following reconstruction presents the events as the actually happened.

In the counterfactual Polish foreign policy toward Ukraine after 1989 is the realization of a dream about the buffer state between Poland and Russia dreamt by diverging personas such as Adolf Bocheński and Jerzy Giedroń.²¹ Poland was the first

²¹ For Bocheński, see the epigraph opening the paper; for Giedroń: 'In this moment [1999], our Eastern policy is of paramount importance, as I have said on multiple occasions, simply because for us, independent Ukraine is more crucial than NATO. It is not my own wisdom, but Z. Brzezinski's. And I see it as very true. And due to that, I believe we need to do all that is possible to help strengthen the independence of Ukraine' – "Jerzy Giedroń o sprawach polskich, ukraińskich i globalnych. Fragmenty rozmowy z redaktorem paryskiej "Kultury" Jerzym Giedrońem przeprowadzonej w dniu 14 stycznia 1999 r. przez red. TVP Barbarę Czajkowską," *Miocydamu – Między Sąsiadami, Kpakie – 1998 – Kraków*, no. 8, 157.

to recognize Ukraine's statehood and sovereignty in 1991. Poland's post-communist elites, like Aleksander Kwaśniewski, or to the lesser extent Leszek Miller, maintained a very cordial relationship with their Ukrainian counterparts. When it comes to the first Maidan and orange revolution, Polish president – Kwaśniewski at the time – engaged in toning down the conflict and mediated between various Ukrainian political factions – he did his best to help out the pro-Western and prodemocratic, in Ukrainian context, 'orange opposition.' Polish diplomacy, after accession into the NATO and the EU, worked tirelessly for the sake of Ukrainian trans-Atlanticist perspectives – accession to both the NATO and the EU. For this reason, Poland secures the eastern dimension of the EU's Neighborhood Policy – Eastern Partnership (2009). It is important here to emphasize the word 'perspectives'. These were given to Ukraine during the Bucharest NATO summit in 2008. During the time of the first Civic Platform government (2007–2015), as Polish diplomacy works on these Ukrainian perspectives, the question of pre-accession agreement for Ukraine sparked the domestic political crisis in Kiev, which resulted in the second Maidan and Ukrainian revolution of dignity.

Ukraine, oriented toward the Western rule-based world order, is the object of Polish foreign policy of first buck-passing and then bait and bleed and bloodletting strategy. Such Ukraine is 'naturally' anti-Russian and pushed further toward this orientation during the second Putin's term, and Medvedev's interregnum as the Kremlin views its behaviour as more and more in opposition to Russian interests. Russian interests here are understood as the interests of the Russian foreign policy-making elite concentrated around Putin, with all of his historic-national and greater Russian neuroses. From the perspective of Kremlin's kleptocratic interests and the personal interests of its ruler, a hybrid response was an obvious necessity. The example of West-oriented Ukraine was dangerous for their rule, as it was an obvious example that Soviet man could have a country more affluent and freer; however, it would be flawed, than the 'mother Russia'. Hence the annexation of Crimea by the 'little green man', hence the inspiration of the Donbas and Luhansk separationism that led to what basically should be called a civil war. During this war, Russia created a frozen conflict that stymied any trans-Atlanticist prospects for Ukraine; however, they were weak after the Bucharest memorandum.

This moment could be perceived as a turning point for Polish foreign policy toward Ukraine – the change from the deflection of the costs of common balancing against resurgent Russian imperialism (buck-passing) to the bloodletting of Russia through Ukrainian hands (bait and bleed). The initial phase of such a policy was the game to empower Ukrainian sovereignty and pro-Western orientation backed by an implicit understanding that such Ukraine would be more threatened by Russia and hence willing to pay the bigger part of the costs of balancing its larger neighbour. What is even more important is that such Ukraine would be considered by the Kremlin elite as a success story that they would not be able to tolerate. This confluence of perceptions and interests could potentially, and actually, escalate to Russian hybrid aggression post-2014 that closed and finalized Poland's bait

and bleed policy. This situation would involve the diminishment of Russian material capabilities and, likewise, in the case of Ukraine. Poland's capabilities would be relatively untouched, and hence, its relative power potential vis-à-vis both Russia and Ukraine would rise.

The costs for Russia would be the first round of, however, weak Western sanctions, the rise of the perception of Russia as an imperialist/revisionist power in the West, and most crucially, the closure of the potential political settlement for the clash of Ukrainian and Russian interests.

From this perspective, the lack of Poland's presence at the negotiating table during the Normandy Format and Minsk I and II Accords ceases to be a sign of the relative weakness of its foreign policy. If Poland's strategic goal was to antagonize Ukraine toward Russia and profit from both sides bleeding themselves in the conflict, its final conclusion in 2014–2015 would not be in Poland's national interest. The frozen conflict realized Poland's security interest and gave perspective to realize its economic interests as well – Ukrainian economy did not have the potential to compete with Poland on the European common market. It also gave the perspective for the realization of Poland's political interests – weak and in need of external help, Ukraine would be more willing to concede to Poland's historical policy, especially in the instance of exhumation of the victims of Volhynian genocide perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists during the 2nd World War. Moreover, as a bonus, the migrants from Ukraine, running from conflict and enticed by the prospect of living in a culturally close and safe country, could choose Poland as a place to stay filling to some extent Poland's demographic deficit. Still, political and economic considerations were secondary, as what mattered the most was that Poland's relative power vis-à-vis Russia and Ukraine would rise.

The period from the beginning of the Russian hybrid operation in Donbas and Luhansk and the annexation of Crimea (2014) to the full-scale invasion (2022) is a period in which Poland's diplomacy does only what is strictly necessary for Ukraine to stay in the game. The baiting with the trans-Atlanticist perspective thanks to Poland's help, playing the norms of the Western rule-based order so as to be able to paint Russia as an aggressive imperialist state and waiting for further opportunities derived from Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The opportunity materialized itself on 24th of February 2022 with the beginning of the Russian 'Special Military Operation'.²² Despite the fact that the Western intelligence community cast aside the Ukrainian cause as lost, the brave nation fights on due to the heroic fight of its people and the

²² In a recent interview with a Hungarian news outlet, former German Chancellor, A. Merkel, described the situation before the Russian Invasion where she was trying to set up another round of EU-led negotiations between Russia and Ukraine in 2021. According to her words, the initiative was blocked by the Baltic states and Poland. Regardless of whether it was her intention to put the blame for the initiation of hostilities on these countries, the situation could be incorporated into this counterfactual as a further example showing how Poland was engaging in bait and bleed strategy. Partizán, "Angela Merkel: A Magyar Nép Feladata Eldönteni, Újraválasztja-e Orbán Viktort," YouTube, October 3, 2025, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wjSHkSPUxRc>.

courageous leadership of Volodymyr Zelensky. Poland quickly recognized the opportunity and was the first country of the EU and NATO to send large quantities of lethal military equipment to fight Ukraine. It is important to mention that from the perspective of this counterfactual, if the authorities in Warsaw believed that Putin's Russia would not stop in Ukraine, they would not send that equipment, since it would be desperately needed to defend Poland.

Conclusion

The above counterfactual is an obvious oversimplification, even if one believes that buck-passing and bait and bleed were the actual paradigms of Poland's foreign policy toward Ukraine. However, in essence, the oversimplification of the thought experiment is something to be expected; in real international politics, the capabilities of Poland to follow through with such strategies would be very much dependent on the interests and actions of other major players in the region – the USA, EU, Germany, France, and China—to name only a few. Furthermore, the actual agency and extraction capability of the Polish state during the period in question did not enable it to conduct such a gambit. To reiterate, the present Russo-Ukrainian war is a result of complex causal nexus and is a good example of emergence in the international politics. To ascribe the reason for the war to agency of one actor is to deeply misunderstand the nature of milieu. It is also important to distinguish between the causal argument, and normative one – in the latter case it is Russia that is responsible for the war. The pro-Western direction of Ukrainian political community was chosen by this community itself, although one might applaud that Poland did what little it could to support in a coherent manner this decision by our neighbours. To think that Poland, or for that matter any other Western country or their constellation, had the power to influence Ukrainian society to 'turn westwards' and decide to leave the Russian sphere of influence is to deny Ukrainians their agency. It is a move that the Kremlin elite likes to perform, and one the author finds rather short sighted – especially if one takes into the consideration how Ukrainian staunch resistance for the Russian invasion actually showed the agency of this strong and independent nation.

Still, the counterfactual vision is conducive to the discussion about Poland's more transactional foreign policy toward Ukraine in the spheres of historical policy and economics. Faux reconstruction is already transactional. The non-transactional policy would involve Polish soldiers fighting hand in hand with Ukrainians against the common threat, and Poland's society being targeted by Russian Drones and Missiles. Since this is not the case, and if one believes the hierarchy of interests of both countries is proper, historic and economic ones should wait until the conflict is over. The realization of these interests of Poland would hinge on our skillful usage of international institutions that we are already part of – as insiders, we can have plenty of leverage if we approach it strategically. There is no need to force the hands of Ukrainians when their existence as a nation is jeopardy. From this perspective,

the altercation between Poland's President and Ukrainian historians that was mentioned at the beginning of the text is especially disheartening, as clearly it is not in the best interest of both parties.

Some interesting writings in both classical and neoclassical realist traditions are dedicated to the ability of the state to mobilize its population for the purposes of its foreign policy. Both in the form of Morgenthau's national morale and Schweller's mobilizing quality of the state's ideology, these immaterial factors play an important role in the amount of power that the state has.²³ From this perspective, the 'Volhynian issue' gets a new urgency as it is a great topic to be exploited by the Russian Propaganda. Ukrainians need nation-forming myths to be able to mobilize against Russian aggression. Poland's staunch 'transactionalism' in this issue could play into Moscow's hand by depleting the Ukrainian national morale. On the other hand, the issue not being solved depletes the mobilization of Polish society to help, even though from the perspective of the hierarchy of interests, this should not be the case.

On the normative plane, Poland's drive to pressure Ukrainians on the issue of the Vohlynian genocide during wartime can be likened to the following. Imagine your neighbour was hit by an electric scooter in front of your lawn. The accident broke his leg and his mobile phone. The neighbour happens to own a dog that sometimes defecates on your lawn and he does not clean after it. Do you call the ambulance only after he solemnly swears that he will always clean after his dog? What value does this promise made under duress have? How is it morally different from the Russians using their ethnic minority to exert political pressure on the Baltic states? Political realism is often invoked in this context, but is it really realistic to act in a plainly immoral manner in order to ensure a relatively minor interest? This author does not think so.

Let us return to the mobilization argument - if we assume that the primary interest of Poland is to maximize its power, mobilization is a key part of it. In our national character, lies the romantic propensity to 'suffer for a cause' - often not even our own as in the traditional Polish adage 'for yours and our freedom'. From this perspective, it is hard to expect that the Polish nation would watch in satisfaction the Ukrainians' struggle against Russia, a country we too perceive as our enemy. This sort of voyeurism could result in the depletion of our national morale and hence runs counter to the interests of our political community.

The final conclusion is derived from the strategic and powerful quality of the counterfactual. In this thought experiment's alternative history, Poland was able to conduct a masterful long-term strategy, however morally appalling. In reality, our

²³ Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations*, 147–152; R.R. Schweller, "Neoclassical Realism and State Mobilization: Expansionist Ideology in the Age of Mass Politics," in *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, eds. S.E. Lobell, N.M. Ripsman and J.W. Taliaferro (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 227–250.

foreign policy is far from that ideal. The discrepancy between the rising material capabilities at the current disposal of our political community and the ability to shape them into desired foreign policy outcomes is somewhat lacking. One could say that this time, we were lucky in international politics at the expense of Ukrainians. Our bilateral relations with Ukraine after the war's end will be tumultuous as the discrepancy between war (similar) and peace (divergent) time interests will play its course. Only sound institutions tasked with the creation of foreign policy will be able to tone down this tumultuous quality that form the perspective of security of both parties is not in their best interest. What is important in this matter is also the fact that in the future, post-war relations, Poland will enjoy the superiority of material capabilities over Ukraine, superiority of the state institutions and superior position in international structures like NATO and EU. From this perspective, even if the economical costs of supporting Ukraine's accession to the transatlantic institutions are be high, as long as they do not jeopardize Poland's security, they are the cheaper price of our security than the life of Polish soldiers.

Declaration

I am the only author of this paper, no generative AI was used in the preparation of its text.

Data availability

No data is associated with this article.