Sociopolitical Impacts of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Poland, Germany, and Turkey: A Comparative Analysis of National Responses and Public Sentiment

Zihang Wang[1,a,*]

[1]*King's School Canterbury, Kent, UK*

a. 21zw@kings-school.co.uk

*corresponding author

Abstract: The Russia-Ukraine conflict began in 2022 and represents the biggest military action in 21st century Europe. However, this conflict did not arise out of the blue. The conflict is the culmination of many centuries' worth of social and political factors. Like in any war, the effects of it have not only been felt in Ukraine and Russia but also in its neighboring and more distant countries across Europe and beyond. This essay will focus on the sociopolitical impacts of the conflict on three key countries: Poland, Germany and Turkey, exploring the specific ways in which these nations have been affected both socially and politically by the ongoing crisis. This paper explores the impacts of the conflict on wider European countries, analysing how the war has affected the sociopolitical structures of Poland, Germany and Turkey. Poland has demonstrated a closer alliance towards the West to protect itself from Russian aggression, resulting in strong humanitarian support for Ukraine and public solidarity towards Ukrainian refugees. Germany has shifted its long-standing foreign policy to adopt a similar anti-Russian stance, creating public concerns with regard to being drawn into the war. Turkey has a unique perspective, appeasing both the West and Russia as it relies on both to maintain its domestic socioeconomic situation. This analysis provides insight into the wider European sociopolitical response to the conflict.

Keywords: Russia-Ukraine conflict, NATO, EU, sociopolitical impact.

1. Introduction

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has sparked discussions among writers. A large proportion of the literature focuses on the historical, political and economic factors which resulted in the conflict. The relations between Ukraine and Russia are complex, rooted deeply in their shared history and entangled culture [1]. This resulted in the factors causing the crisis to be multifaceted. Ukraine has been subjected to periods of Russian influence and control since the 17th century, repeatedly being drawn back into Russian rule, especially during the 20th century by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) [2]. The relationship began to change after Ukraine's independence in 1991, when Ukraine began to move towards the Western political sphere, growing alliance with Western powers such as North Atlantic Trade Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), which Russia interpreted as a direct threat and challenge to its own sphere of influence [3]. Russia's capture of Crimea in 2014 played a crucial rule in this current conflict as it was a pivotal moment when Russia

used its military force to achieve its geopolitical aims. This highlights the mistrust between the two nations which led to the worsening of their relations and advancing the conflict [4]. Scholars such as Serhii Plokhy emphasize the long historical path that has led to the current crisis, while others like Benjamin Abello challenge the dominant Western political stance, suggesting that Western policies have also played a role in increasing tensions [5]. Daniel Treisman offers insight into Putin's ideology, explaining how domestic and international pressures shape Russian policy towards Ukraine, and Stephen Larabee [6, 7] draws a comparison with other historical conflicts, though his analysis predates the current situation, limiting its relevance. While a large proportion of existing literature focuses on the conflict's direct impacts on Russia and Ukraine, this essay will consider the sociopolitical consequences for other European countries, specifically Poland, Germany, and Turkey. These nations have experienced different effects of the conflict due to their own unique historical and geopolitical contexts; through this, their responses provide critical insights into the delicacy of the European reaction to the ongoing crisis. This essay focuses on providing a clearer understanding of the wider impact of the conflict, moving beyond the two-sided focus to a broader European perspective.

2.   Poland

As a neighboring country of Ukraine, Poland has a significant historical, geographical and political position, making it important in the ongoing conflict. This nation has a complex relation with Russia and Ukraine: as a former satellite state of the USSR, Poland joined the EU in 2004, making it a 'crumple zone' in East-West relations due to its location in Central Europe [8]. This section delves into the social and political impacts caused by the Russia-Ukraine crisis.

2.1.   Poland's Historical and Geopolitical Context

Situated on the North European Plain, Poland shares an intertwined history with Ukraine and Russia [9]. As a former member of the Eastern bloc, like Ukraine, Poland was heavily influenced by Soviet politics and control until the fall of Communism in 1989. However, unlike Ukraine, Poland was a satellite state and not a constituent republic of the USSR and was subject to less Soviet control [10]. Its geographical position on the boundary of East and West in combination with its political past means that it now navigates a delicate balance between Western European powers and the influence of Russia. Bordering Belarus, a close Russian ally, and Ukraine, the target of Russian invasion, Poland is at the frontline of any potential westwards Russian expansion [11]. With this threat to its national security, Poland has adopted an active stance in supporting Ukraine and allying itself with the Western powers in not just a show of international solidarity but also as a means of self-protection [12].

2.2.   Poland's Integration into Western Politics

Poland has a desire to secure its place in the Western political structures, and joining the EU can be seen as the step towards better stability, economic growth and protection from Russian political influence [13]. However, Poland's relation with the EU has not always been positive, particularly in relation to whether Poland should follow the EU's supremacy [14]. The Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to the recalibration of Poland's position within the EU as Poland has played an active role in managing the conflict by providing humanitarian aid and military support for neighboring Ukraine [15]. By taking a leading role in these works, Poland has demonstrated its commitment to European security, forming a better relationship with the EU and in return for greater EU support for its national security.

2.3. The Social Impact of the Russia-Ukraine Conflict on Poland

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has affected Polish society, with its citizens demonstrating an anti-Russian sentiment through their support for Ukraine. This solidarity has its roots in geopolitics because until 1939, Western Ukraine was part of Poland; whilst not always positive, this shared history has marked its bond between the nations [16]. The shared history is combined with a strong cultural and religious connection between the two countries, with a majority of religious citizens following Catholicism. The shared traditions and cultural elements which further strengthens the links between the Polish and Ukrainian people [17].

The cultural, historical and political connections between the two countries have led to Poland becoming a key supporter for Ukraine. This can be seen in Poland's humanitarian efforts as it has welcomed approximately 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees since the start of the conflict, the highest number in the European Union [18]. This large number of refugees is hugely supported by the Polish citizens. A May 2023 survey states that 74% of Poles approved their government's decision to accept Ukrainian refugees [19]. This response creates contrast to the original Polish refugee policies, where the government and a majority of the public have been resistant to accepting refugees from the Middle East and Africa [20].

The social solidarity is reflected in the wider political stance of Poland's government and its citizens. In 2023, a report from the Pew Research Centre showed that 77% of the Polish population viewed Russia as a major threat [21]. This shows that Poland is united by its anti-Russia perspective, which contributes to its sense of national identity where Poland sees its support for Ukraine as part of a broader struggle against Russian aggression. The sociopolitical support for offering humanitarian aid, supporting refugees and building an anti-Russian sentiment is encouraged by Poland wanting to align itself more closely with the EU and Western politics as a means of protection against any potential attack from Russia.

The sociopolitical impact of the Russia-Ukraine conflict on Poland can be mainly seen through the improvement of relations with the EU and its strong political stance against Russian influence, which is underlined by the anti-Russian sentiment in Poland's national identity. This is an interesting instance of how the conflict has had a sociopolitical impact on other European countries.

3. Germany

Germany is a country that once was partially ruled by the Soviet Union, with East Germany functioning as a satellite state while West Germany was ruled by Ally powers [22]. This history of political division has shaped Germany's political stance and its identity which, after the fall of the USSR, has established itself as a representative of strong Western democracy. This section explores how the Russia-Ukraine conflict has led to sociopolitical change with regards to Germany's political ideology and foreign policy.

3.1. Zeitenwende: The Shift in Foreign Policy

The Russia-Ukraine conflict had a significant impact on Germany's foreign policies, which can be seen through Germany's new political concept 'Zeitenwende', a historical turning point of its foreign policy that departs from its traditional pacifist stance [23]. The Russian invasion of Ukraine represented a threat to EU security and solidarity and caused Germany to shift its geopolitical stance, its defense strategies and its reliance on Russian resources such as natural gas. Throughout the political spectrum in Germany, from the traditionally conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU) to the more left-leaning Social Democratic Party (SPD) and Green Party, all parties had a unified stance in supporting Ukraine and taking a leading role in the collective response to the conflict, which has reinforced Germany as a key political power within the EU [24].

Germany's decision to provide military aid has triggered a complex domestic debate. The pacifist stance that was adopted after World War II has led to a strong anti-war sentiment among its citizens, who do not want to be drawn into any conflicts [25]. Germany has previously limited its engagement in any military actions but, by providing military aid to Ukraine, some of the German public questions whether this shift aligns with Germany's post war identity. In 2024, a survey suggests that public support for Ukraine is still strong but many are concerned about Germany's involvement with NATO and any military repercussions for supporting Ukraine [26]. This tension highlights the challenge faced by the government in balancing moral responsibility with public attention, particularly as political leaders push for stronger involvement in the conflict.

3.2. Energy Crisis and Economic Implications

The Russia-Ukraine conflict has also brought a significant challenge to Germany's energy sector. Before the conflict began Germany was heavily dependent on Russian natural gas. However, this has brought a change as the conflict began: Russia's aggressive actions have pushed Germany to rapidly develop its energy sources, boosting investments in renewable energy such as wind and solar energy generators [27]. However, this transition has a huge cost. This sudden shift in energy resources has led to an increased energy prices for consumers and businesses, contributing to inflation and a broader economic strain [28]. Through this it created concerns about Germany's sustainability in its economy and whether Germany can maintain its position in the global export market.

3.3. Refugee Integration

Germany's humanitarian response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict includes accepting a significant number of Ukrainian refugees. While this decision has been in line with Germany's commitment to humanitarian principles, the inflow of refugees from Ukraine has raised concerns. In September 2022, 1 million Ukrainian refugees crossed the German border [29]. This resulted in concerns about their integration with the Germans as Germany's experience with refugees has not always been positive: the 2015 refugee 'crisis' is still being publicly discussed and judged, and many people question whether German public infrastructure has enough capacity for migrants [30]. Although many Germans have stated solidarity with Ukrainian refugees, some are concerned about the pressure on housing, healthcare, and social services . A growing number of Germans worry that this inflow of migrants, combined with economic challenges, may worsen social tensions. This opinion reflects broader worries about whether Germany's society can continue to absorb large numbers of refugees without long-term societal consequences.

Germany's solidarity and unity attitude towards the Russia-Ukraine crisis has played a stabilizing role in EU policy. The government has consistently supported Ukraine, leading a clear EU stance on diplomatic and foreign policies, allowing Germany to have a stronger political relationship with its allies. Despite adopting this political stance, support from the German public is cautious due to the potential effects on its society, economy and national security.

4. Turkey

Turkey has a unique political stance as it is both a NATO member and a nation with strong ties to Russia. This has significantly shaped its response to the Russia-Ukraine conflict, which differs from the responses of Poland and Germany, which are heavily influenced by EU policy. This section will analyze the unique perspective of a country that aims to maintain a more balanced outlook on the East and West.

4.1. History and Geopolitics

As a NATO ally, Turkey has formally condoned Russia's aggression. However, its reliance on Russia for energy and defense created an important link between the two nations [31]. Turkey was already tackling severe inflation, which exceeded 67.07% in 2022, largely due to mismanagement of economic policies [32]. The conflict further worsened this situation, particularly due to the increasing energy prices. Turkey imports around 45% of its natural gas from Russia, and the war has resulted in the energy market to be fragile and unstable [29]. This dependency on Russian energy has constrained Turkey's ability to fully align with NATO sanctions on Russia due to the risk of further economic chaos. At the same time, Turkey has strong economic ties to the EU, which is its largest trading partner [30]. In order to maintain this diplomatic balancing act, Turkey has taken on the role of a mediator, exemplified in the grain export deal brokered in 2023 between Russia and Ukraine, and its unwillingness to impose harsh sanctions on Russia in line with other NATO countries [31]. Turkey's mediation efforts highlight its desire to maintain peace in its neighbouring blocs while avoiding separating either side. Turkey's diplomatic balancing act between Russia and EU stems not only from security concerns but also economic chaos.

4.2. Social Impact

Turkish public opinion on the Russia-Ukraine conflict has reflected the country's complex historical relationship with both Russia and the West. On one hand, many in Turkey are wary of Russian expansion, aware of the shared history between the Ottoman and Russian Empires [32]. On the other hand, distrust towards Western institutions, particularly NATO, has always been in the minds of the citizens, has grown in recent years. Many Turks do not trust Western policies or motives such as the US decision to force sanctions on Turkey for its purchase of Russian military hardware [33]. These tensions have reinforced a nationalist narrative that emphasizes Turkey's role as an independent regional power.

The economic fallout from the ongoing crisis has further increased social tensions within Turkey. The rising cost of living, worsened by higher energy prices and supply of goods, has triggered public dissatisfaction [34]. Protests have increased as inflation has affected household incomes, and frustration towards the government has increased (ibid). The war has further divided public debate on Turkey's international alliances. Some argue that closer ties with the West could stabilize the economy through investment and integration with Western markets, while other supporters want a more self-sufficient and independent foreign policy (ibid). The difference in these views reflects a broader debate about Turkey's identity and its place on the global stage, as it navigates between its Western alliances and its regional ambitions.

Turkey has experienced significant social and political issues due to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. Its citizens are already sensitive to its domestic economics and politics, which shapes the reaction to the conflict. Turkey aims to maintain positive relations with the East and the West as it is reliant on NATO support, EU trade and Russian natural resources. This results in a unique political balancing act that differs from Germany and Poland, who must show political support and cohesion with the EU.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, by giving examples like: Poland, Germany and Turkey this portrays different countries with similar and contrasting political approaches towards the Russia Ukraine conflict. This is due to their history, culture, geography and religion. Through these four elements this caused domestic social issues relating to refugee crisis in Poland and Germany, increasing cost of living in Turkey,

and the rise in concerns about the conflict in Germany. Through this it develops an example of how the wider European countries has been affected by the ongoing war.

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