

Poland's geopolitical strategy (2004–2015)¹

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The aim of the article is to analyse the strategic choices made in international relations by a smaller state that does not have the status of great powers and participates within the structures of the European Union. In the theoretical part of this article, a survey of selected theories presents the role of smaller states and their basic geopolitical strategic choices. It seems that the most commonly used strategy for smaller states is *bandwagoning*, i.e. attaching oneself to a great power in exchange for support and protection. Another basic strategy is called *balancing*. It is usually defined as an attempt to balance the influence and geopolitical clout of an overly strong actor. The variant of balancing is an attempt to build an *alternative geopolitical core*, composed of smaller countries in the region. Another variant is an attempt to “bind” powers in a framework of institutionalized international cooperation, preferably in the EU. An important strategy is *buck-passing*, which involves pushing responsibility to others. Yet another is *appeasement*, which involves giving in to the demands of the dominant state, and final approach may be the accumulation of wealth. In the empirical part, Poland's geopolitical strategy is analysed, taking into account the European integration in that strategy.

Keywords: geopolitical strategy, smaller (small) states, great powers, Poland, EU.

Introduction

The aim of the article is to analyse the strategic choices made in international relations by smaller state that do not have the status of great power, and is involved within the structures of regional integration. The analysis will focus on the country that has low international standing, because of their geographical location and of its small geopolitical potential. It seems that Poland, because of its relatively small geopolitical (i.e. economic, demographic, military, etc.) potential, and because of its location on the eastern border of the European Union may be regarded as an example of such a state. The specific, to some extent peripheral location of Poland is underscored by the fact that it is situated on the border of two geopolitical blocks, i.e. between the West (whose core members are the US and biggest EU countries) and Russia and its sphere of influence². Poland's location is also adjacent to other peripheral countries that are the scene of rivalry between Russia and the West (among these countries, Ukraine is the most important case in point).

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² Russian sphere of influence is related to former Soviet Union republics, and in the 21st century may regard the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Commonwealth of Independent States.

Studies of international relations often focus on the role of great powers, as those countries obviously have the greatest impact on shaping the international order and geopolitical relations. Scholars pay much less attention to smaller countries, especially those considered to be peripheral. In the theoretical part of this article, I will attempt to answer the question what are strategic choices made in the area of foreign policy that can boost the influence of smaller states in the geopolitical order and improve their autonomy in relation to regional and global powers. After these theoretical considerations, I will move to analyse Poland's presence in the EU in the light of the considerations outlined above. I will analyse Poland's geopolitical strategy in recent years³, starting from the country's accession to the EU in 2004 and ending my analysis at the end of 2015. In analysing Poland's geopolitical strategy, I will be interested primarily in evidence of long-term actions in relations with Poland's most important allies both within the EU and beyond, with the main geographical directions and objectives of Poland's foreign policy, as well as with the biggest threats defined by decision-makers.

Methods to have more autonomy

There are various factors to consider in order to analyse ways in which smaller states can increase their autonomy. In realist terms, the stability of the geopolitical system is of the fundamental importance. The more stable the system, the higher the security of the subordinated states, but also the lower their political autonomy. Signs of weakening of the leading powers or of rising influence of other, aspiring actors can be seen as symptoms of destabilisation. In structural terms, the evidence of this process would be a change of geopolitical potentials between the great powers, leading to a reconfiguration of power relations between them, or even to replacing the old system of international institutions with a new one. A period of destabilization would potentially create a window of opportunity when the hitherto dominated countries could increase their autonomy, but it would also increase the risk of war and other costs resulting from the change in the international order. Such change most often allows small or peripheral countries to emancipate themselves from the control of one power only to fall under the spell of another power. Therefore, it would not necessarily lead to a substantial increase of international autonomy of smaller countries.

Some realists argue that a bipolar order is always more stable than multipolar [4; 5, p. 5]. In turn, the proponents of the liberal paradigm emphasise the need to introduce du-

³ For the purposes of this article, **strategy** is defined as a direction and mode of action, which a state (or other international relations actor) intends to adopt in the long term, in order to achieve its goals and gain political advantage. Strategy therefore involves long-term actions taken on the international arena in response to changes in international relations, to ensure the country's long-term survival and improvement of its international standing. The term **geopolitics** is used in the literature in two meanings: either to denote a theoretical approach to international relations, or to refer to applied actions taken by different actors in the wider social, economic or international context. In the latter usage, the classical geopolitical approach involves references to geography and international politics, and thus to the spatial development of relations between countries and the role of geographical location in international relations. In more general terms, it refers to power and broadly-conceived political actions that involve e.g. the realm of ideas, culture, identity, ecology, economics and international relations. In this article I use the term geopolitics primarily in relation to the concept of power in international relations and in the context of various types of strategic actions that can enhance the autonomy of smaller or peripheral states, and improve their position within the international system [1, p. 31, 39; 2, p. 1–14; 3, p. 86–93].

rable legal regulations and stable international institutions in order to ensure the stability, security and increasing the autonomy of the smaller states. The European Union, with its high level of institutionalisation, is deemed to play a special role in this process. International organizations (whether active on the regional or global scale) do not operate in a geopolitical vacuum. They require support of the leading powers (or of groups of allied powers), including prevention of geopolitical and economic crises, and covering the costs of stabilization and maintenance of the international system.

In turn, the proponents of the world-systems perspective argue that it is the notion of semi-periphery that plays a crucial role for the autonomy of the smaller countries. The *raison d'être* of the semi-peripheries is their defence against degradation to the status of peripheries that would be fully dependent on the economic and political centre [6, p. 29]. These countries also seek to minimise their distance to the centre, and thus increase their autonomy in international relations. The key to success lies primarily in economic development. A booming economy gives an opportunity to increase geopolitical potential. According to Wallerstein, growth within this paradigm can only be achieved if a country abandons the exogenous model of economy⁴. This includes strengthening protectionist support for national businesses in order to help them effectively compete on global markets. By the same token, a semi-peripheral state, and the efficiency of its administration and economic policy become the main stimuli of growth and competitiveness of the local economy and of the local accumulation of capital. In essence, this approach is thoroughly geo-economic, because it implies that the government's economic policy should increase the country's autonomy on the international scene. Likewise, according to Rokkan and Urwin [8], economic growth, treated as a primary factor of political advancement, is crucial for increasing the autonomy of the peripheral areas. The scholars also point out to other important internal conditions, prominent among whom is the cultural potential, and especially the ideological invigoration of the local community, based on its shared identity, history, language and customs. Rokkan and Urwin also point to the role of local elites who can seek paths of promotion and advancement not on the basis of connections with the metropolis, but on the basis of the country's autonomy, at the same time building the power of local communities.

In conclusion to the above discussion of relevant theoretical approaches, one can posit that the crucial decisions pertaining to the international order, and thus to the fate of the smaller countries, are taken by the great powers, especially those aspiring to world leadership. Nevertheless, smaller states can still enjoy a modicum of autonomy in their decisions. Different scholars point to various factors that allow these countries to increase their autonomy, including the growth trajectory of the local economy, the quality of the state apparatus and administration, qualifications and career models prevailing among the local elites and qualities of the local culture. Regrettably, an analysis of all these factors goes beyond the scope of this text. However, in the following part of the article, I am going to refer to one key element, namely, strategic choices. In this context, I would like to consider what options of geopolitical strategy are available to the elites of smaller countries.

⁴ Economic exogeneity in this article is defined as a given economy's dependence on external funds, technologies or aid in order to achieve growth. A country thus becomes dependent on strategic decisions made by external actors: either centres of political power or foreign investors [7].

Strategies of smaller states

International relations scholarship contains many analyses of geopolitical strategies, though admittedly such analyses mostly focus on the great powers. In the case of choices faced by smaller or peripheral states, only some strategies available to great powers are practicable (and usually they need to be substantially modified). It seems that the most commonly used strategy for smaller states is *bandwagoning*, i. e. attaching oneself to a great power in exchange for support and protection [9; 10; 5, p. 162]. This strategy is like the historical institution of patronage. The patron, i. e. a dominant regional or world power, offers its client some share of benefits resulting from the power's privileged position in the international order. Two examples of this type of strategy are the close relations between Poland and the US after 1989 (especially on the geopolitical plane), and between Poland and Germany within the EU (mainly in the economic sphere, in the period 2007–2015). The main threat to this strategy is the asymmetrical relationship between the two parties. It can result in exploitation of the potential of peripheral country by the dominant partner, or forcing the former to bear the costs in return for relatively minor economic benefits. It can even lead to deterioration of the overall safety of the weaker partner, especially if the dominant partner pursues an expansionary or aggressive policy on the international arena. It should be remembered that in an era when great powers possess nuclear weapons, smaller and peripheral countries can easily become the battleground of a military conflict between major powers.

Another basic strategy in international relations is called *balancing*. It is usually defined as an attempt to balance the influence and geopolitical clout of an overly strong actor [11; 12; 13, ch. 11]. This strategy can be pursued e. g. by means of alliances designed to balance the geopolitical potential of threatening powers. In the case of smaller states, the balancing strategy can be applied in two situations. A smaller state can apply it in a situation of choice between two competing powers or geopolitical systems. However, according to the realist theory, this type of action is possible for smaller states only in exceptional circumstances and usually for a relatively short period of time. Alternatively, a context for using balancing strategy can also arise from escalating rivalry between the powers, or from a change of the international system. An example of this scenario is the situation of Ukraine after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the country's attempts to balance the conflicting influences of the US and the EU on one hand and Russia on the other. It appears that this policy could only be implemented temporarily, and it led to the geopolitical conflict that broke out in 2014. If solutions of this type should achieve any durability, they must be based on an agreement of the rival powers that divide their zones of influence in a specific area or agree to create a geopolitically neutral zone that would be free from the unequivocal dominance of either power. An example of such scenario would be the case of Finland during the Cold War.

Another variant of balancing strategy available for smaller or peripheral countries is an attempt to build an *alternative geopolitical core*, composed of smaller countries in the region. An example of this strategy are various groups and agreements in Central Europe, aimed to boost agency and autonomy of the region. The risk of this strategy lies in the ephemeral nature of cooperation between countries that individually have only a small geopolitical potential. Because every member of the group is continually tempted to throw in its lot with some great power (which would potentially give the country more economic

or political benefits), smaller states enter into regional cooperation with similarly-sized countries in an instrumental way, treating such links as a bargaining chip in other international negotiations, and only rarely perceiving such relationships as permanent and binding within the region.

A slightly changed variant of this geopolitical strategy is an attempt to “bind” powers. This strategy was used through history with respect to powers who attempted to conquer or dominate the smaller actors. Powers can be “bound” in a framework of institutionalized international cooperation, preferably on a regional scale. An example of this strategy is the development of European integration, in particular the creation and development of European institutions and European law, which will “bind” the smaller countries and the great powers in the same degree. The existence of these institutions may thus serve as a way to limit the natural hierarchy of power occurring between the stronger and weaker countries. An application of this strategy to the sphere of Polish-Russian relations would involve an attempt to promote close cooperation between Russia and European institutions, especially those shaping the EU Eastern policy. The biggest threat to this strategy would lie in a scenario in which the largest states seize too much control over the international institutions and organisations or attempt to use these bodies to reinforce the hierarchical relationship between the central and peripheral countries.

Another important geopolitical strategy is *buck-passing*, which involves pushing responsibility to others. It is somewhat similar to maintaining neutrality in geopolitical rivalry [14; 15; 5, p. 157–162]. This attitude seems to be completely at odds with the observable behaviour of Polish policy-makers on the international arena. In truth, Poland’s attitude can be seen as the opposite of buck-passing, at least after 2003. In fact, Poland was often proactive and “punched above its weight,” particularly when honouring its commitment as US ally in the face of the conflict between Russia and the West. The buck-passing strategy is especially effective in periods of mounting tension between rival powers, or in situations of an outbreak of armed hostilities between them. The possible benefits of this strategy bring to mind a Polish proverb: “Where two are fighting, the third wins”⁵. An application of this strategy involves a waiting game: the smaller country must hope that the rivalry between the two powers will result in weakening their potentials, which will lead to an increase of geopolitical importance of smaller, or even peripheral, states. The history of Poland in the early twentieth century provides a perfect illustration of this strategy, in the shape of the conflict between the powers who had partitioned Poland in the late eighteenth century. The First World War weakened the potential of all combatants, including Russia, Germany and Austro-Hungary, who had orchestrated the three stages of partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795. As a result, in 1918 it was possible for Poland to reunite and regain independence, and even win war with the Soviet Russia shortly thereafter (1919–1921).

Yet another geopolitical strategy is *appeasement*, which involves giving in to the demands of the dominant state, which pursues an aggressive or revenge-driven policy on the international arena [16, p. 193–194; 17]. The aim of appeasement is finding an amicable solution, and thus ending a conflict without incurring the significant costs of war. Appeasement is an especially practicable policy in case of conflicts with countries that have decidedly more substantial geopolitical potential, and in a situation where war could

⁵ John Mearsheimer also calls this strategy “bait and bleed” [5, p. 153–154].

result in a loss of sovereignty of the weaker state. A textbook example of appeasement are the concessions made by the Czech Republic in answer to the demands of Nazi Germany in 1938 (which met with the approval of other great European powers).

Yet another viable geopolitical strategy for smaller states is simply the accumulation of wealth [5, p. 143; 6, p. 29; 18–19], by means of encouraging the growth of national economy and strengthening the economic potential, which over time could result in an increase of the country's international position. The necessary condition of implementing this strategy is focusing on the endogenous potential of the local economy and reducing excessive economic dependence on external actors. Another condition is continued geopolitical stability and the existence of a stable international order that would facilitate economic exchange.

Some scholars also enumerate other factors that can increase the autonomy of a smaller state, e. g. the possession of nuclear weapons [20]. However, the process of acquiring such weapons is very time-consuming and costly (and also likely to encounter many obstacles from the countries who already possess them). Another possible approach is focusing a country's foreign policy actions on coherent ideological message, e. g. one related to the country's historical heritage, highlighting the need for compensation for previous wrongs perpetrated by the great powers. This strategy was applied by Poland during its membership negotiations with the EU [21].

Poland's geopolitical choices

Following the political and economic transformations in Central and Eastern Europe initiated in 1989, the cornerstone of Poland's geopolitical doctrine has been Atlanticism, i. e. basing the country's foreign policy on a close alliance with the USA. Scholars indicate that Poland's strategy was characteristic of bandwagoning [22, p. 297; 23]. Joining the camp of America — the undisputed winner of the Cold War's made sense, especially when one takes into consideration America's important position in European geopolitics and its high impact on the EU. The majority of the Polish scholars and public opinion have perceived the alliance with the US very positively. For all this, some Polish political scientists express their negative opinions of this alliance. They point out to the fact that the relationship is highly asymmetrical, and that the US reaps virtually all the benefits, whereas the Polish *raison d'état* is not sufficiently protected or promoted. The critics of the cooperation state that Poland does not receive its fair share of political or economic benefits from the relationship. The alliance is in fact based on the assumption of Poland's unquestioning loyalty, which significantly weakens the country's negotiation position every time when a divisive issue occurs. What is more, this strategy proves to be costly, and sometimes leads to decrease of national security and worsening relations with the EU partners, including Poland's allies in Central Europe [24, p. 65; 22, p. 251–253]. An example of this attitude was the support for successive US actions in the Middle East (in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in 2016–2017 also in Syria), which required the involvement of the military and political support without the expected benefits, as promised economic contracts or the visa waiver for Polish citizens going to USA. Furthermore these actions led to acute disputes with some EU countries, for example with France and Germany in 2003, as well as the increased threat of terrorist attacks.

Moreover, Poland's strategy leads to excessive dependence on the US, accompanied by complete lack of influence over America's policy [22, p.298]. Its obvious result is "lack of strategic agency and the demotion of Poland to the ranks of America's satellite states" [25]. For some scholars the continued pursuance of bandwagoning strategy proves that Poland is not adept at defining its own strategic interests, formulating a comprehensive and coherent foreign policy and implementing strategic thinking. It also shows that it is impossible for Poland to "maintain a serious, non-partisan debate about foreign policy objectives that would be autonomous, and free from external influences" [24, p.68, 69].

The scholars prove the shallowing of strategic vision primarily to bandwagoning to US is a permanent element of Polish foreign policy after 1989, that can be associated with all successive governments and virtually all top-ranking officials and policy-makers [22, p.300; 24, p.63]. It can be linked to the model of peripheral state. In such a setup, the initiative is usually shown by the leading powers and the role of the smaller countries is often reactive and dependant on the great powers policy demands. In the reported model a smaller state can have its own strategic objectives but most important of them could be implemented only with the support of the great power. Geopolitical projects undertaken by the Polish government on the international arena are often inspired by the US as the political patron, or at least are greenlit by the Americans [26, p.394; 24, p.68]. For this reason, the calculation of benefits and costs of the alliance is skewed in favour of the USA. Poland's actions as a loyal ally do not always seem aligned with the country's best interest. According to the scholars [27, p.136; 22, p.319], Polish foreign policy shows a marked tendency for grandstanding and swagger, without taking into account to the country's real geopolitical standing or potential. An example of these conflicting tendencies are the relations with Russia, wherein Poland's actions often do not take into account the obvious difference of geopolitical potentials between the two countries. Since the escalation of conflict in Ukraine in 2013, Poland's support for Ukraine resulted in increasing economic losses (for instance economic sanctions imposed by Russia) and geopolitical risk of further destabilisation on its Eastern frontier.

The relationship between the US and Poland, as described above, has numerous ramifications for Poland's position and behaviour on the EU arena. It is not a coincidence that Poland is perceived by its European partners as America's staunch ally in all matters related to EU policies. A case in point is primarily Poland's strong support for fostering transatlantic relations between the EU and America, including the presence of NATO and American troops in Europe. Poland has repeatedly voiced an opinion that NATO plays a leading role in maintaining security of the EU. Poland has also been working in order to bring about the expansion of both NATO and the EU to the east, in order to incorporate such countries as Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, and the Western Balkans [26, p.412–414]. Precisely because of loyalty towards the US, Poland was also initially reluctant towards the development of the Common Security and Defence Policy⁶, especially since the project was interpreted as an attempt to increase the autonomy of the EU in its relations with NATO and the United States. Incidentally, Poland eventually performed a complete U-turn and became an active proponent of this policy, treated as a European "pillar" of NATO [22, p.206; 27, p.117, 125–127, 136]. Another important consequence of

⁶ Before signing the Treaty of Lisbon, it was called European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP).

the Polish-American relations is Poland's Eastern policy, and especially Poland's attempts to influence the EU policy in this direction [26, p. 411].

Poland's accession into the EU in 2004 was a fundamental decision that had multiple geopolitical objectives. Its most important result was naturally forging stronger ties with the West, including further strengthening of cooperation within NATO, and deepening the alliance with the US, which was the cornerstone of Polish foreign policy. The United States supported not only Poland's membership in NATO, but also in the EU. This was to cement the Polish relations with the West, but also more strongly connect the EU with the US. Joining the EU was also meant to stabilize relations with Germany, Poland's neighbour but also its long-time historical rival. Now the two countries would forge closer ties in the broader context of EU institutions. Finally, in a more long-term perspective, Poland's objective was to use the EU potential and institutions in order to shape EU's Eastern policy in line with Warsaw's geopolitical agenda. The Eastern policy is one of Poland's priority interests in the EU, which was evidenced by the launch of the Eastern Partnership, a joined initiative of Poland and Sweden, adopted by the EU Council in 2008. The goal of the Eastern Partnership was to utilise the EU instruments in order to influence Poland's Eastern neighbours, and bind them more closely to the EU, creating an outermost circle of influence and a buffer zone between the EU and Russia [28, p. 423]. The EU used soft means of influence, including fostering economic relations, creating investment incentives, offering aid, and promoting Western political ideas and European regulations.

The launch of the Eastern Partnership was undoubtedly a success of Polish diplomacy, even if its effects were somewhat superficial [28, p. 426]. From the point of view of the Eastern partners, the benefits of the Partnership were not sufficiently attractive, as it did not constitute a track to EU membership. The volume of financial aid was also relatively small [29]. While it can be said that the possibility of accessing the EU internal market was an attractive incentive for Eastern business entities, they could only do so if they adhered to EU norms and regulations (which was discouraging for many). Additionally, fierce competition on the EU market meant that this possibility was not as attractive for Eastern actors as it might have been.

The Eastern Partnership intended to provide an avenue for discussions of trade, economic strategy, travel agreements and other issues between the EU and its Eastern European neighbours. The Partnership was to deliver the foundation for new Association Agreements between the EU and its partners. But the negotiation of Association Agreements proceeded extremely slowly, and the final stages were only achieved after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in 2014. The EU signed Association Agreement treaties with Georgia and Moldova in 2016 and with Ukraine in 2017. Regardless of the sluggishness the Polish administration (even though the launch of the Partnership was a Polish suggestion), it soon transpired that other countries have an axe to grind in this matter. For various reasons and in various degrees, Germany, France and Russia were generally hostile towards the Partnership [28, p. 435–437]. The case of the Eastern Partnership illustrates the great powers' actual level of influence over EU initiatives that could potentially have important geopolitical implications.

One should also remember that the EU Eastern policy promoted by Poland contributed to weakening the relationships between the EU's Eastern neighbours and Russia, which was treated by the Kremlin as an intrusion into Russia's geopolitical domain of influence. The Eastern policy proposed by Poland had been inspired by the thought of

Jerzy Giedroyc and Juliusz Mieroszewski, according to whom Poland's strategic objective should be weakening Russia. To this end, Warsaw should try to "prize" its neighbours from the Russian sphere of influence and bind them to Poland (in the case of the Eastern Partnership, this would be done using the EU instruments)⁷. As one scholar claims, the post-1989 Poland "has not formulated any comprehensive Eastern doctrine other than the Promethean vision outlined by Giedroyc" [32, p. 153].

The fundamental weakness of Poland's Eastern strategy is its complete disregard for the actions and objectives of Russia, which remains the region's biggest power. It is also difficult to imagine that Poland could pursue its policy in relations with Russia without incurring significant costs, especially as the geopolitical potentials of the two countries are completely disproportionate. For this reason, a more productive strategy for Poland would be seeking to stabilise the situation beyond its borders, and in the long-term, attempting to "bind" Russia with Europe and integrate it closer with the EU structures. Poland could also try use the Russian market as an outlet for Polish products, thus fostering its own economic growth and increasing the geopolitical importance of Warsaw. The currently pursued policy of weakening the Russian sphere of influence, thus reducing Russia's geopolitical status, seems too ambitious and well beyond Poland's present capabilities. What is more, Poland's agenda is perceived as threatening or as being out of line with the EU interests by many European Member States (even in Central Europe). But, it seems, to be consistent with the strategy of Washington, at least after 2012 (when Putin was elected President for a third term). All in all, Poland's Eastern policy is the absolute opposite of *buck-passing* (i. e. maintaining passivity and pushing the responsibility to other actors). It also does not have the marks of a *balancing* strategy, wherein Poland would try to balance the power of Russia by binding it more and more closely to the European Union. It seems that Poland pursues a *bandwagoning* strategy, binding itself very closely to America as its dominant partner.

Some scholars argue that the dominant strategy of the member states on the EU forum is a flexible exchange of temporary alliances, which are forged around a particular issue, and then disband [33, p. 502]. This policy could have its uses in the first period of Poland's membership, when Polish decision-makers had a stance that was not only pro-American, but was also characterised by a marked distrust towards Germany and a reluctance against deepening the integration with the EU (and hence was sometimes explicitly called Eurosceptic) [22, p. 207, 282; 26, p. 399]. However, since 2007 (and until 2015), Polish government pursued its EU policy in close cooperation with Germany⁸, endeavouring to maximise Poland's influence in the EU, but also becoming supporter of the German agenda within the European Union⁹. Again, Poland's actions seem to follow a bandwagoning strategy (this time with Germany as the dominant partner). Poland's cooperation with Germany was focused solely on internal EU issues and economic matters, and seems to be only of secondary importance for Poland's decision-makers in comparison with the all-important American alliance.

⁷ Such ideas were proposed and promoted e. g. by government think tanks (The Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and The Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW)) and by some political scientists [30–31].

⁸ The cooperation effectively ended after the change of government in 2015 [28, p. 433].

⁹ For example, Poland's presence in the Weimar Triangle was often perceived as a boost of Germany's position in relation to France [26, p. 398].

Another geopolitical development are the attempts to shape alliances in Central Europe. The most important of these is the Visegrad Group, which dates back to 1991. The obvious goal of stronger cooperation in Central Europe was strengthening the role of Poland both in the region and on the European arena [26, p. 400; 34, p. 372]. However, Poland's instrumental approach to fostering regional cooperation has often been jarring for smaller states, who accused Warsaw of dearth of real commitment to the region's future and of being too forceful in promoting its own agenda. Two ideas on which Warsaw was adamant were harnessing the Visegrad Group into supporting Poland's vision of Eastern policy, and widening the regional cooperation to include more countries such as the Baltics and countries participating in the Eastern Partnership [34, p. 376–377].

Scholars point out that the effectiveness of the Visegrad Group (the so-called V4) was startlingly low. Though over the years the Group managed to cooperate on a range of issues (including the EU cohesion policy and foreign and defence policies), the level of cooperation was usually relatively low, and tended to be limited to political rhetoric and declarations [24, p. 62; 34, p. 366, 378]. The interests of the V4 countries were diverse, and this fact was often used by the great powers, when they wanted to destroy the Group's unity for their purposes. Some partners also took objection to what they perceived as excessive pro-American or anti-Russian stance of the Polish government. As a result, Poland's attempts to build a regional geopolitical core in order to balance the influence of the biggest regional powers turned out to be quite unsuccessful. This strategy was also of secondary importance, as *bandwagoning* took clear precedence.

Yet another initiative taken on the geopolitical plane were the attempts to counteract divisions within the EU, mainly opposing the processes of differentiated integration between the euro area and the rest of the member states. In view of the Polish elites, such division could lead to further strengthening the European centre and sealing other countries' peripheral status. Therefore, such attempts can be regarded as manifestations of the balancing strategy. Initially, Polish government announced that it was going to put the country on the fast track to the monetary union (in 2008, the Prime Minister Donald Tusk unexpectedly announced Poland's readiness to enter the eurozone in 2012). However, the deepening economic crisis in Western Europe put a check on these ambitious plans. The government decided to postpone the decision on entering the euro area, and at the same time it was trying to be involved in the initiatives undertaken during the crisis, whose goal it was to reform and strengthen the monetary union. Such actions can collectively be described as "leaving one's options open." Polish authorities were joining all subsequent anti-crisis initiatives (the Euro-Plus Pact, the Fiscal Compact, the Banking Union etc.). In 2012, the Polish government adopted a resolution saying that Poland will enter the common currency system only when both sides will be ready. In other words, Poland will not enter the eurozone until the country's economy will not have shown symptoms of increase in competitiveness, and until the euro area will not have recovered from the crisis [26, p. 405–410]. It should also be noted that Berlin supported strengthening Poland's ties with the euro area and Poland's attempts to become part of the subsequent anti-crisis initiatives, even though the Polish government was delaying its final decision to adopt the common currency. Poland's policy of "keeping its options open" was actually feasible thanks to the strong support of Germany, and therefore — thanks *bandwagoning*. Once again, this geopolitical strategy proved its effectiveness. Other Polish geopolitical actions can either supplement it or are of only secondary importance.

Conclusion

The new right-wing government after 2015 elections came into sharp conflict with the European institutions on compliance with the EU values, including the rule of law and democratic principles. It also had a completely different vision for the future of the EU from the most of other member states. It wanted to reduce and re-nationalize EU powers instead of further advancement of integration. Against this background, the relationships between the Polish and the German governments have cooled considerably. In particular, the Polish authorities have distanced themselves from the German proposals for integration progress in the field of defense policy, recognizing that they would be a strategic challenge for the NATO and the US presence in the region. In 2017 Poland eventually joined the Permanent structured cooperation (PESCO) but only in two out of 17 projects of this form of collaboration in the Common Security and Defense Policy. In these conditions, the Polish government's policy aimed to strengthen cooperation within the Central Europe (the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative), as well as within transatlantic relations.

The alliance with the USA has been the cornerstone of Poland's foreign policy since the 1989 transformation, and the *bandwagoning* strategy in relation to America as the dominant partner took centre stage, and overshadowed all other strategic actions. It was by far more important than the alliance with Berlin and intermittent attempts to build a regional geopolitical centre of power in Central Europe. As I said above, before 2015 Poland treated the Visegrad Group rather instrumentally, and used its leading role in the Group often as a tool to boost its own international standing, without too much concern for the Group's future. Smaller countries in the region resented this attitude, and for this reason they sought alternative political alliances, either bilateral or region-wide (but without Poland). An example of such an initiative is the Slavkov Triangle — an alliance of Austria, Czech Republic and Slovakia, whose launch can be seen among others as a result of dissatisfaction with the confrontational attitude of the Polish authorities with regard to the conflict in Ukraine [35].

In conclusion, Poland's reliance on bandwagoning strategy can be seen as moderately successful, but it also comes at a cost, and may lead to increased risks to national security. Poland's actions show no evidence of employing other geopolitical strategies, such as *buck-passing* (maintaining passivity and pushing the responsibility to others), or *appeasement*. To a small degree, it utilised *balancing*, but Poland's balancing actions were only of secondary importance, and they were always subordinated to the primary geopolitical strategy. Polish decision-makers seem to neglect one of the most promising strategic actions that can be implemented by smaller or peripheral states, namely geoeconomic support of the domestic economy in order to strengthen the country's geopolitical potential. Poland's economic policy relied on creating incentives for foreign investors and on absorption of EU aid in the spheres of agricultural policy and cohesion. Even though this policy resulted in GDP growth and a boost of domestic demand, it did not lead to deep structural changes and sustainable increase of the competitiveness of Polish economy. To the contrary, it contributed to increasing economic dependence on external inflow of capital and technology and reliance on the European centre [36–38]. In addition, the economic advantages of low production costs in Poland could run out over time, especially when wages or energy

costs would increase [39]. A sign of this trend may be weakening of productivity of the economy and the growing threat of so-called “middle income trap”¹⁰.

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¹⁰ The middle income trap is a economic development situation, where a country which attains a certain income (due to given advantages and development) will get stuck at that level.

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