

# Perception of Polish Statements on War Reparations from the Federal Republic of Germany in Russian Electronic Media (July 2017 — August 2018)

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The presented study examines the perception and assessment of Polish claims for war reparations from the Federal Republic of Germany by the Russian society as represented in electronic media in July 2017 — August 2018.

**Aim.** The study aims to examine the opinion of Russian citizens on this issue and to assess their attitude toward any attempts to reconsider international agreements reached after World War II.

**Tasks.** The authors review electronic media that address the issue of Poland's claims for reparations from Germany; assess the trends and the prevailing opinion among the Russian society on this issue; analyze the opinion of Russian citizens and based on the obtained results predict the perception of the potential Polish claims for reparations from Russia for the damage dealt to Poland during military action in its territory in 1941–1945.

**Methods.** This study uses the methods of structural and statistical analysis as well as social forecasting of the impact of information published in electronic media on the public opinion of a neighboring country.

**Results.** Active discussion of Poland's claims for reparations from Germany in electronic media was rather limited in scope. The interest in this topic was incidental, as evidenced by the level of meme reactions. The predominant reaction of Russian citizens to Poland's demands for reconsidering international agreements reached after World War II as well as earlier agreements lies in the negative-indifferent spectrum. This study makes predictions and assumptions about how Russia's official representatives may perceive the potential measures that may be taken by Poland in terms of any economic claims to Russia with regard to reparations for the war of 1941–1945.

**Conclusions.** The public opinion expressed in electronic media is reflected in the position of the country's official representatives and fully corresponds with it. Russia's public authorities appear to be uninterested in Poland receiving reparations from Germany, do not consider it to be a subject for discussion, and exclude the possibility of claims and demands to Russia in the context of this issue. The general tone of comments based on historical facts in the Russian media can be described as calm. At the same time, comments are not without sarcasm and criticism of Poland's foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Polish war reparations, Germany, Russia, claims, damage, media, society.

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## Восприятие польских заявлений о военных репарациях от Федеративной Республики Германия в электронных средствах массовой информации России (июль 2017 г. — август 2018 г.)

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Исследование направлено на изучение восприятия и оценки российским обществом заявляемых польской стороной требований о получении военных репараций от Федеративной Республики Германия (ФРГ), которые представлены в электронных средствах массовой информации (СМИ) России в июле 2017 г. — августе 2018 г.

**Цель.** Исследовать мнение россиян по данному вопросу и оценить их отношение к любым попыткам пересмотра международных договоренностей, достигнутых после Второй мировой войны.

**Задачи.** Провести обзор электронных СМИ, которые затрагивали тему требований Польши, обращенных к ФРГ, о репарационных выплатах; оценить тенденции и преобладающее мнение в российском обществе по этому вопросу; проанализировать мнение российского общества и на основании анализа сделать прогнозы о восприятии россиянами возможных требований польской стороны к России о возмещении ущерба, причиненного Польше во время военных действий на ее территории в период Великой Отечественной войны 1941–1945 гг.

**Методология.** При проведении исследования использованы методы структурного, статистического анализа и социального прогнозирования воздействия информации, представленной в электронных СМИ, на общественное мнение сопредельной страны.

**Результаты.** Активность обсуждения вопроса, связанного с требованиями Польши о выплате репараций от ФРГ, находит отражение лишь в нескольких электронных СМИ. Интерес к этой теме был незначительным, что подтверждается уровнем мемовых реакций. Тенденция реакций у представителей российского общества на требования Польши о пересмотре международных договоренностей по результатам Второй мировой войны и ранее достигнутых договоренностей находится в спектре негативно-равнодушного восприятия. В статье сделаны прогнозы и высказаны предположения о восприятии официальными представителями России возможных мер, предпринятых польской стороной в отношении каких-либо экономических претензий к России, связанных с требованиями репарационных компенсаций вследствие войны 1941–1945 гг.

**Выводы.** Общественное мнение, представленное в электронных СМИ, отражено в позиции официальных представителей страны и полностью согласуется с ней. Органы государственной власти в России не заинтересованы в настоящее время вопросом получения Польшей репараций от Германии, не видят предмета для дискуссии, исключают возможность претензий и требований к России в аспекте рассматриваемого вопроса. Общий тон комментариев с опорой на исторические факты в российских СМИ можно охарактеризовать как спокойный. Вместе с тем комментарии не лишены иронического сарказма и критики в отношении польской внешней политики.

**Ключевые слова:** польские военные репарации, Германия, Россия, требования, ущерб, средства массовой информации, общество.

The question of Polish claims for war reparations from the Federal Republic of Germany (Germany) appears like a comet in the Polish political firmament. This subject is recurrently debated whenever some political circles feel urged to generate opinions that are favourable to them, consolidate certain views among declared supporters and, most importantly, gain wider public support in crisis situations or during the upcoming election campaigns. The issue of Polish compensation from Germany has been much written about in Poland. It should be stressed that two fundamental publications on this topic appeared (in 2004 and 2019)<sup>1</sup> as a kind of reliable, expert response to political campaigns focusing on the significance, topicality and importance of the issue of compensation from Germany, which were not very substantive but found wider public resonance.

Occasionally recurring but very harsh public statements on compensation from Germany made by Polish politicians have prompted the author to take an interest in how these are perceived in the Russian electronic media, treated as a medium for and a means of conveying the opinions of Russian society. Electronic media, being easy to access and analyse, are by their very nature an attractive and convenient subject of research for a foreign scientist, even if it would be even more attractive to analyse the full spectrum of

Russian media. Unfortunately, such study would require a major scientific project to be carried out by a larger team of researchers and based on sufficiently comprehensive materials. Given the resources available, the author limited the time of the study to one year. The prerequisite for determining the starting point of the study was a speech made by Jarosław Kaczyński, President of the Law and Justice Party, at the party's congress on 1 July 2017<sup>2</sup>.

This is essentially a focus study of the Russian media since, as mentioned above, with the resources available, it was impossible for the author to make a comprehensive, cross-sectional evaluation of the mass media content. Nevertheless, the study covered a number of titles representative of the Russian Federation's electronic media world.

During the study, the author intuitively assumed that the Polish discussion on war reparations from Germany should potentially arouse more interest in connection with the Kaliningrad Region (KR). Given the special geopolitical status of this administrative unit in the Russian Federation (exclave) and its location on the territory of the former East Prussia that once belonged to the Third Reich, it could be expected that the issue of reparations from Germany raised in the Polish debate would find more resonance in the Russian media when correlated

<sup>1</sup> The two-volume publication in 2004 [1; 2] and in 2019, the publication: [3].

<sup>2</sup> Speech made on 1 July 2017 by J. Kaczyński, President of the Law and Justice Party, at the party's congress in Przysucha. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PM4HUfArZdY> (accessed: 28 February 2019) [4].

List of Analysed Leading Electronic Media in the Russian Federation

Name of Medium	Website Address
РИА Новости: главные новости часа	<a href="https://www.ria.ru">https://www.ria.ru</a>
Комсомольская правда — Digital	<a href="https://www.kp.ru/online/news/2848590/">https://www.kp.ru/online/news/2848590/</a>
Lenta.Ru	<a href="https://www.Lenta.Ru">https://www.Lenta.Ru</a>
Известия	<a href="https://www.iz.ru">https://www.iz.ru</a>
РБК («РосБизнесКонсалтинг»): новости, курсы валют, погода	<a href="https://www.rbc.ru">https://www.rbc.ru</a>
Рамблер/медиа	<a href="https://www.rambler.ru">https://www.rambler.ru</a>
Газета.Ru: главные новости и подробности текущих событий	<a href="https://www.gazeta.ru">https://www.gazeta.ru</a>
Московский комсомолец	<a href="https://www.mk.ru">https://www.mk.ru</a>
Информационный канал «Вести»	<a href="https://www.vesti.ru">https://www.vesti.ru</a>
RT	<a href="https://www.ru.rt.ru">https://www.ru.rt.ru</a>
ТАСС: новости в России и мире	<a href="https://www.tass.ru">https://www.tass.ru</a>
L!FE.ru	<a href="https://www.life.ru">https://www.life.ru</a>
Hearst Shkulev Digital — Новости (НГС)	<a href="http://www.hearst-shkulev-media.ru">http://www.hearst-shkulev-media.ru</a>
Аргументы и Факты // Объясняем, что происходит	<a href="https://www.aif.ru">https://www.aif.ru</a>
Российская газета: издание Правительства РФ	<a href="https://www.rg.ru">https://www.rg.ru</a>
СМИ2: новостной агрегатор и новостная обменная сеть	<a href="https://smi2.ru/">https://smi2.ru/</a>
Издательский дом «Коммерсантъ»	<a href="https://www.kommersant.ru">https://www.kommersant.ru</a>
РЕН ТВ	<a href="https://www.ren.tv">https://www.ren.tv</a>
НТВ.ru: новости, видео, прямой эфир телеканала НТВ	<a href="https://www.ntv.ru">https://www.ntv.ru</a>
Lentainform.com	<a href="https://www.Lentainform.com">https://www.Lentainform.com</a>
Федеральное агентство новостей	<a href="https://www.https://riafan.ru/">https://www.https://riafan.ru/</a>
Cosmopolitan	<a href="https://www.cosmopoliten.ru">https://www.cosmopoliten.ru</a>
Эхо Москвы	<a href="https://echo.msk.ru/search/">https://echo.msk.ru/search/</a>
URA.Ru: российское информационное агентство	<a href="https://ura.news">https://ura.news</a>
Ежедневная деловая газета «Ведомости»	<a href="https://www.vedomosti.ru">https://www.vedomosti.ru</a>
Аktion-МЦФЭР: издания для директоров	<a href="http://www.action-mcfr.ru/">http://www.action-mcfr.ru/</a>
1Mediainvest: федеральный медиахолдинг	<a href="http://1mediainvest.ru">http://1mediainvest.ru</a>
ДНИ.РУ: интернет-газета	<a href="https://dni.ru">https://dni.ru</a>
ВЗГЛЯД.РУ	<a href="https://vz.ru">https://vz.ru</a>
Ридус: периодическое интернет-издание	<a href="https://www.ridus.ru/">https://www.ridus.ru/</a>

Source: Athor's own Research.

with the Kaliningrad Region (KR). In view of the fact that the KR has a long border<sup>1</sup> with Poland, communities living in border areas are naturally more interested in the events in the neighbouring country and there is an intense movement of people between the Republic of Poland and the KR, it could be assumed that the issue of reparations from Germany raised in the Republic of Poland will be reflected in connection with the Kaliningrad Region's geopolitical situation.

When determining the subject of study, the author reflected upon the observed failure to recognise the Russian aspect in any statements made and, mostly verbal, activities taking place

in Poland in connection with reparations to be possibly obtained from Germany. The fact that some representatives of the Polish Parliament and the political party which has been in power since 2015 have no clear understanding of the existing legal regulations and the legal and international situation regarding the possibility of war reparations being obtained by Poland from Germany (under the Potsdam scheme) (which, in practical terms, are impossible to obtain) may lead to a dead end. Only then will it become clear that further raising and occasional forcing of the issue of reparations will bring authors of such statements to the unexpected and surprising conclusion that the Polish road to German

<sup>1</sup> The total length of the land border between the Republic of Poland and the Kaliningrad Region in the Russian Federation is 210 km, the sea border is 22 km whereas the land border between the Kaliningrad Region in the Russian Federation and Lithuania is 273 km.

reparations, as outlined in such enunciations, leads, in a way, through the capitals of all four great powers, and thus also through Moscow [3, p. 368–375; 5, p. 5] as a kind of intermediary [6], and obviously through Berlin.

This statement is fully justified in view of the Potsdam arrangements on repatriations in which the issue of Poland obtaining compensation from Germany very much depends on Russia's position and approach to that matter. If the intellectuals and experts (see also [7]) supporting Polish politicians who demand reparations from Germany had been more reliable in their work and thought pragmatically, the said politicians would not have overlooked the role of the Russian Federation (as the successor of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) when referring to and demanding reparations for Poland. The provisions of the Potsdam Agreement, as confirmed during the "Two Plus Four" conference in Paris [8], clearly highlight the role of each of the four great powers (and thus also the role of the USSR's successor) in the process of establishing a "peace settlement" for Germany.

According to the author, the Russian Federation, as the successor of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, one of the four signatories of the Potsdam Agreement of 1945, should have a keen interest in the claims for war reparations for Poland from the Federal Republic of Germany which have been raised more frequently after 2015 by some political forces in the Republic of Poland. Under the Potsdam Agreement (for more details see: [9]), reparations for Poland were to be paid out from the Soviet zone in Germany. The amount of and rules for such reparations to be obtained by the Polish party were clearly defined in the Potsdam Agreement and in the Polish-Soviet Agreement concluded in August 1945<sup>1</sup>. In this context, it would seem a natural reaction for Russia to pay more attention to, and for the Russian Federation's media to take greater interest in, Polish statements on the problems of reparation. After all, it was the Soviet Union that unilaterally renounced the reparations from Germany<sup>2</sup> on 23 August 1954 and thus implying a similar decision of the government of the People's Republic of Poland. In the situation when the USSR, as one of the four powers responsible for Germany as a whole, renounced its reparations, Poland was

left practically without options, as there was no mechanism and possibility to collect reparations, as referred to in the Potsdam Agreement, from the part of Germany allocated to the USSR under the said Agreement. Additionally, with the German Democratic Republic having been established in 1949 in the Soviet occupation zone, the People's Republic of Poland had even more limited possibilities of, and, in practical terms, was completely prevented from, obtaining reparations from the GDR area. Drawing conclusions from the situation at that time, and being clearly encouraged by Moscow and East Berlin, the government of Prime Minister Cyrankiewicz decided to unilaterally renounce war reparations [2, p. 269–271]. The USSR's decision and the Polish "Statement..." [Ibidem] of 1953 practically closed the question of obtaining reparations from Germany. Consequently, efforts undertaken in Poland to contest the legal status in this respect will have little effect [10].

The discussion that has been going on in Poland for many years as to whether the government in Warsaw that had made that decision was sovereign is pointless in so far as, if we questioned its sovereignty, we would have to consider, for instance, the agreement between the government of the United States of America and the government of the People's Republic of Poland regarding claims of nationals of the United States (including those of Jewish origin) for property lost on Polish territory [11] during the war, as well as all other international agreements and treaties concluded by the government in Warsaw between 1944 and 1989, to be invalid.

With these briefly presented conditions in mind, the author has analysed the content published by the listed web portals. It can be clearly stated that the issues related to Polish reparations from Germany were of marginal relevance for the Russian media. To present the relatively low significance of the topic "Poland — Reparations — Germany", below we show how often the main topic was discussed as compared to other subjects related to Poland, using the example of the information portal of the foreign news agency РИА Новости.

Given the small number of publications on the analysed topic, it can be assumed that the subject is of little interest to the Russian audience, and the passive attitude of the media in

<sup>1</sup> Umowa między Tymczasowym Rządem Jedności Narodowej Rzeczypospolitej Polskiej i Rządem Związku Socjalistycznych Republik Radzieckich w sprawie wynagrodzenia szkód wyrządzonych przez okupację niemiecką z 16 sierpnia 1945 r. [Agreement between the Provisional Government of National Unity of the Republic of Poland and the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on compensation for damage caused by the German occupation of 16 August 1945] (in: [2, p. 41–44]).

<sup>2</sup> By concluding the relevant agreement with the GDR (treated as Germany!), see Agreement between USSR's and German Democratic Republic's governments on reparations and financial and economic obligations (in: [2, p. 267–268]).



**Exemplary Numbers of Publications on Topics Related to the Republic of Poland  
at the RIA News Agency's Website**

Topic	Number of Publications in the Period under Consideration
Polish Reparations from Germany	27
Nord Stream	1 272
USA Sanctions	7 156
Baltic States (Pribaltyka)	525
Transit of gas Through Poland	69

Source: author's own research based on the information obtained from the RIA News agency website (<https://ria.ru>) in the period under consideration.

this respect results from little attention being paid to the statements of the Polish state's leaders that the effects of the World War II need to be reviewed with a view to Poland obtaining reparation from Germany. The Russian electronic media were dominated by clearly negative and critical comments on Polish demands for state reparations from Germany. It was emphasized that the statements referring to reparations were motivated, *inter alia*, by concepts designed to change the Poland's international role, e.g.:

- attempts being made to establish a new bloc of states, the so called "Miedzymorze"<sup>1</sup>, which would be hostile to both Russia and the "old Europe" countries. This resulted in unrealistic efforts (by the Republic of Poland — JD) of an insignificant Eastern European state directed at the European hegemon — Germany [12];
- Poland striving to obtain a special status in the EU and NATO [13];
- searching for some counter-measures which would affect Germany's position in connection with any possible sanctions against Poland within the EU [14];
- the ruling Law and Justice party (PiS) using the historical memory for its own purposes and relying on support to be provided from across the ocean and Europeans being divided in their opinions in the hope that such action will contribute to increasing Poland's role in world politics;
- looking for instruments to stop the implementation of Nord Stream 2 by weakening Germany's involvement in the implementation of this project [15];
- political bluffing in response to attempts made by the EU to hold Warsaw accountable for limiting the independence of Polish courts [14].
- Reference was also made to internal political motifs such as:
- the personal anti-German views of J. Kaczyński, who controls the Law and Justice party [16].

The Russian media considered the following persons to be the most involved in the public debate on reparations: J. Kaczyński, President of the Law and Justice party; A. Macierewicz, Defence Minister; B. Szydło, Prime Minister; W. Waszczykowski, Foreign Minister; J. Czaputowicz, Foreign Minister and A. Mularczyk, Member of Parliament. It was pointed out that, unlike in Poland, where the speeches were made by leading Polish politicians, only high-ranking German officials, i. e. the Federal Government spokesman, S.R. Seibert and his deputy, U. Demmer, discussed that subject on the part of Germany. It was also emphasized that German representatives clearly stated that the Federal Republic of Germany deemed the question of Polish reparations to be definitely closed and that the Polish government had not addressed an official enquiry to the government in Berlin in this matter [17; 18].

The speech made by the President of the Law and Justice party on 1 July 2017 during the party's congress was perceived in Russia as a kind of signal to open a Polish debate on reparations, which rather resembled a campaign. Most frequently quoted were the statements made by A. Macierewicz, the Minister of Defence, such as:

- "It is not true that the Polish state has given up on reparations due to us from Germany. It was the Soviet colony called the People's Republic of Poland that partially abandoned the reparations related to the territory of the puppet Soviet state of the GDR" [15; 19; 20];
- and a statement on the USSR's responsibility for the Holocaust in connection the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact being concluded with Nazi Germany [21].

Relatively much attention was paid to the speech made by B. Szydło, Prime Minister of the Republic of Poland, on 24 August 2017, in which she stated that Poland had the right to obtain reparations from Germany [22; 23]. Following her speech, it was reminded that in

<sup>1</sup> In the Russian journalistic narrative, the term "Miedzymorze" (Intermarum) is used interchangeably with the term "Trojmorze" (The Three Seas).

2004, a commission appointed by L. Kaczyński, who was the President of Warsaw at that time, determined losses caused in the capital of Poland during the World War II to be USD 45 billion [24].

In some materials, it was pointed out how dangerous it might be when Berlin, being confronted with Polish claims, raises the issue of Poland having made some territorial acquisitions and expelled ethnic Germans from those lands. The activities of Polish politicians were described as follows: "Poland is playing a very dangerous game with the Germans" [15]. When commenting on Poland, Russian authors also referred, *inter alia*, to Greece, which, without success, raised the problem of reparations to be obtained from Germany in 2016 [25].

There were only few materials that referred to the possible role of Russia in the process of demanding reparations from Germany. In the broad context of Polish claims against Germany, V. Kirjeev, a Russian analyst, stated that, following the Polish example, Russia might be entitled to compensation for Poland having occupied the Kievan Rus and a Russian territory having separated from Russia during the German occupation after the 1917 revolution [12].

Special attention was paid to the speeches of A. Mularczyk, Member of Parliament, including his announcements that the Sejm's Bureau of Research would present calculations of the amount of Polish reparation claims [20]. The media followed quite closely the values listed by the Polish Member of Parliament to determine the amount of Polish reparations. It was first stated that the amount requested by him was USD 850 billion, and then a few weeks later that it was USD 543 billion [26].

It was also reported that, *inter alia*, W. Waszczykowski, Foreign Minister, had emphasized the joint responsibility of the USSR and Germany for the causes of the World War II [12] and consequently, made Poland's bid for compensation from Russia [27], whereas J. Czaputowicz, Foreign Minister had stated in Berlin that Polish-German talks on reparations should be held at expert level [28]. It was also pointed out that S. Pięta, Member of Parliament and M. Gosiewska, Member of Parliament made claims for war reparations from Russia as well, demanding payment of trillions of zlotys for "all crimes" committed by the USSR against Poland [29]. The media also noticed the statement of J. Hell, Polish Ambassador to Kiev, who raised the issue of Poland and Ukraine not having obtained the compensation due to them from Germany because all reparations had been taken by the USSR (*i. e.* Russia) [30]. Generally speaking, it can be stated that despite a

number of the above-mentioned publications and the issue of Poland's compensation from Germany being mentioned on several occasions, the Russian electronic media were not particularly interested in this matter.

The author believes that the issue of German compensation for the Republic of Poland was given little attention in the Russian media possibly due to the following reasons:

- 1) the Russian media are not interested in considerations and analyses that could result in a new interpretation of the course and effects of the World War II. This could violate the widespread and well-established myth of the Great Patriotic War that constitutes the Russian society;
- 2) Polish statements on reparations are not considered to be realistic and likely to materially affect or harm the international and substantive interests of the Russian Federation and its citizens;
- 3) activities undertaken in Poland with regard to reparations due from Germany are seen as manifestations of internal political activities and local controversies that do not interfere with the Russian policy goals and even bring certain benefits to Moscow;
- 4) the ostentatious and rather emotional nature of the statements made by Polish politicians is seen rather as a means to find an internal political resonance and provide some excitement for the public opinion than as an action aimed at achieving real political results at the international level.

It should also be emphasized that political statements with calls for World War II reparations from Germany made by Polish politicians are perceived in a very similar way in practically all the analysed publications. Consequently, it can be assumed that different evaluations are rather unlikely to be found in other Russian media that have not been analysed by the author. It should be noted that Russian authors referred to similar demands made against Germany by Greece, though rather to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of Polish claims.

Even if it was noted that Polish politicians also call for reparations from Russia, this subject was not analysed in more detail. With general remarks being made about Poland having little chance of obtaining reparations from Germany, it was implicitly suggested that the same applies to any potential claims from Russia. Unfortunately, the research postulate formulated in the introduction about the possible special relation between the subject of Polish reparations and issues related to the Kaliningrad Region has not been confirmed. This convergence was not found in any of the studied electronic media publications.

Finally, it can be concluded that the issue of Polish compensation from Germany did not become a media event in Russian electronic news portals during the period under review. Its significance can be assessed as low. Despite this subject having been raised, it accounted for 0.2 % of the total number of analysed publications about Poland. The general tone of the comments was rather calm and factual, though not devoid of ironic sarcasm and criticism of Polish foreign policy.

In many cases, the used materials on Polish reparations were the starting point and provided a context for a broader analysis and evaluation of the mechanisms of Polish policy towards the EU and the USA, as well as the

Polish historical policy. It can be assumed that the opinions on reparations expressed in the media during the relevant period reflected the Russian authorities' knowledge and attitude. The media communicated the views and the current position of the Russian Federation's state administration to the general public. Given how the form and content of mass media statements on the Russian Federation's foreign relations are determined, it can be concluded that the authorities in Moscow are not at present very interested in the issue of Poland obtaining reparations from Germany, and to a lesser extent from Russia. The problem is, however, still of relevance and will remain the author's focus of attention.

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