

# POLAND-RUSSIA SOCIAL DIAGNOSIS 2020

How Poles see Russia,  
Russians and Polish-Russian relations



Warsaw 2020



THE CENTRE  
FOR POLISH-RUSSIAN  
DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING

Report on public opinion research



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Report on public opinion research

Survey: ARC Rynek i Opinia

Analyses and report: Grzegorz Sygnowski and Łukasz Mazurkiewicz

Translation: Natalia Mamul

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The Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding

14/16A Jasna Street, 00-041 Warsaw, Poland

tel. + 48 22 295 00 30

fax + 48 22 295 00 31

e-mail: [cprdip@cprdip.pl](mailto:cprdip@cprdip.pl)

<http://www.cprdip.pl>

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# Introduction – context and research objective

A previous survey *Poland-Russia: Social Diagnosis* was commissioned by the Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding in 2014, when the Russian-Ukrainian war was intense. The annexation of Crimea and hostilities in Eastern Ukraine had badly shaken social perceptions of Russia and Russians in Poland. Earlier warming in relations (such as easing cross-border traffic between Poland and the Kaliningrad Oblast) had given way to tensions and negative emotions.

Poles' perceptions of Russia and Russians were put to the test. Up to then Poles' had had a critical view of Russian government policies, but a largely favourable attitude towards Russian society. This balance of positive emotions was shown to be depleted as compared to public opinion polls two years earlier<sup>1</sup>.

Six years later in mid-2020 when the Russian-Ukrainian conflict was no longer attracting so much media attention, Polish-Russian political relations have stabilised at a fairly low level. A strategic dispute over the vision and future of the region determines relations between the two countries. Several years of aggressive 'history propaganda' by the Russian authorities mainly aimed at discrediting Poland as well as numerous unfriendly gestures and decisions are not conducive to positive changes. A separate

study conducted by the Centre in April 2020 on Russian propaganda about history and Russia's information war showed how Polish opinion has seen all this<sup>2</sup>.

This report presents the findings of a new public opinion poll *Poland-Russia: Social Diagnosis* that offers a better understanding of social perceptions of this complex situation in the broader context of respondents' perceptions of other states and nations. Does the deep crisis of trust in Russia and Russians revealed in the 2014 poll after the war against Ukraine still persist? Or are we seeing a move back towards calmer feelings of the period before Crimea's annexation? Do Poles have different views on the Russian state as opposed to the Russian people as before 2014<sup>3</sup>? Does the age of respondents influence their opinions on Polish-Russian affairs? Where might we find an anchor-point for social dialogue with Russians?

The survey findings offer answers to these and other questions, and reveal indicative changes in Poles' attitudes in recent years. This poll covers current questions and longer-running issues: Polish-Russian relations are best analysed from a longer-term perspective combining permanent features of collective memory with sensitivity shaped by changing circumstances.

1 A series of surveys *Poland-Russia: Social Diagnosis*, were conducted in 2012 and 2014.

2 A survey conducted on behalf of the Centre in April 2020: *Information War – Propaganda about History*.

3 See *Poland-Russia: Social Diagnosis 2012*.

# Information on the survey

## Methodology

This was a quantitative survey carried out by the computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) method.

The survey was conducted on a sample of 1,009 adult Poles representative of the population in terms of sex, age, residential area and province.

The data was collected from 3–16 June 2020.

For multiple-choice questions the numbers do not add up to 100%. For single-choice questions, small deviations from 100% are caused by percentage rounding.

## Sample structure

Figure 1. Sex

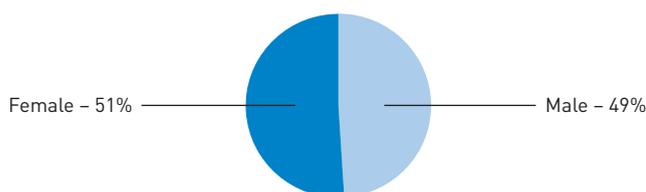


Figure 2. Age

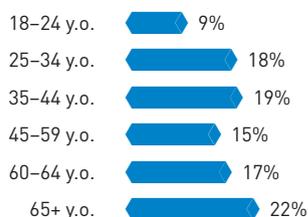
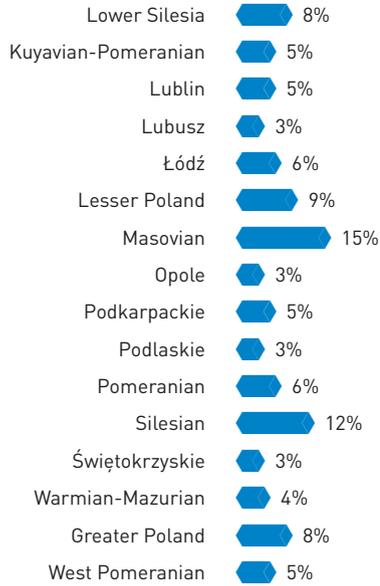
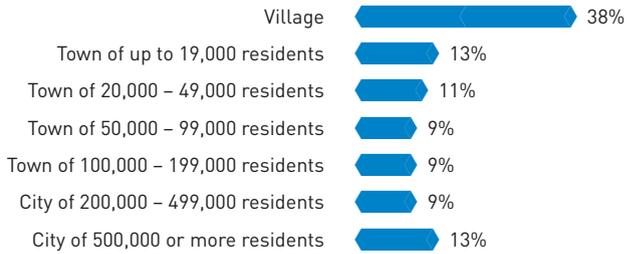


Figure 3. Education



**Figure 4. Province****Figure 5. Residential area**

# How Poles assess other states' and nations' attitudes to Poland

As compared to the 2012 and 2014 polls, Poles now have notably better perceptions of other states' and nations' attitudes towards Poland and Poles.

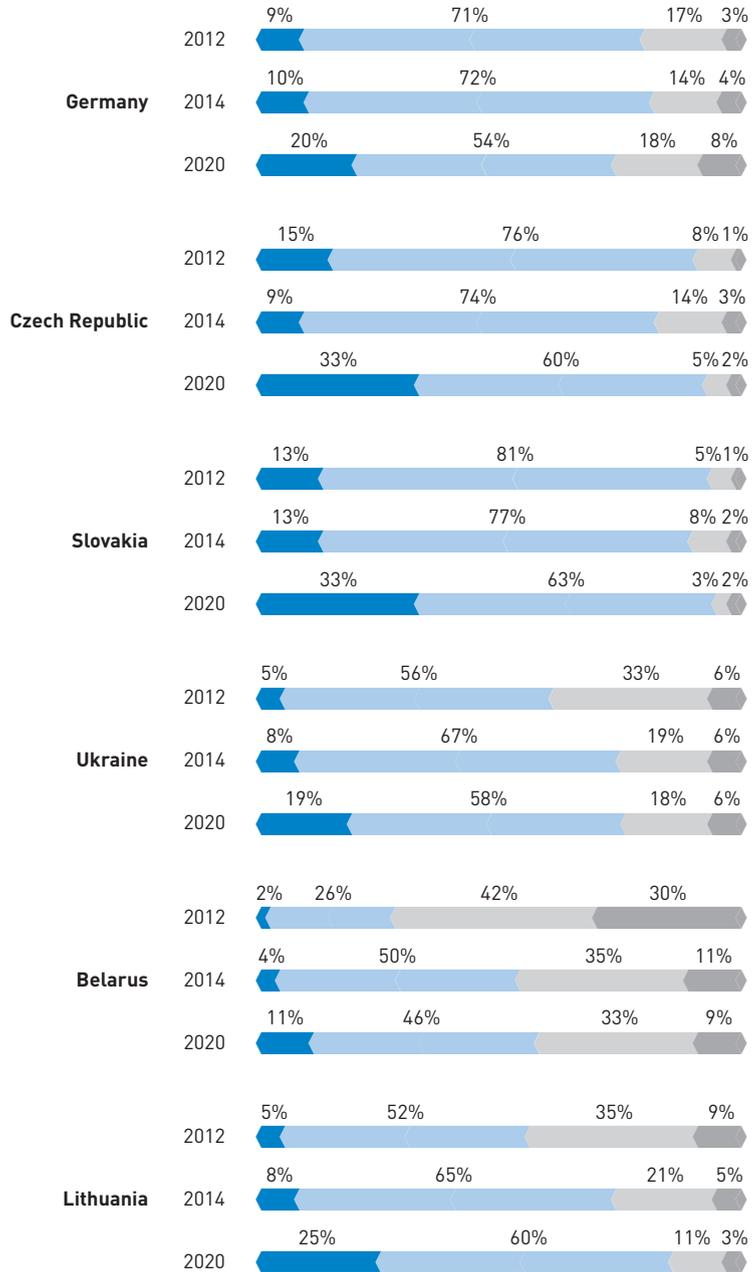
Poles see all neighbouring countries and politically important states other than Russia (such as the USA, France and UK) as having a positive attitude to Poland.

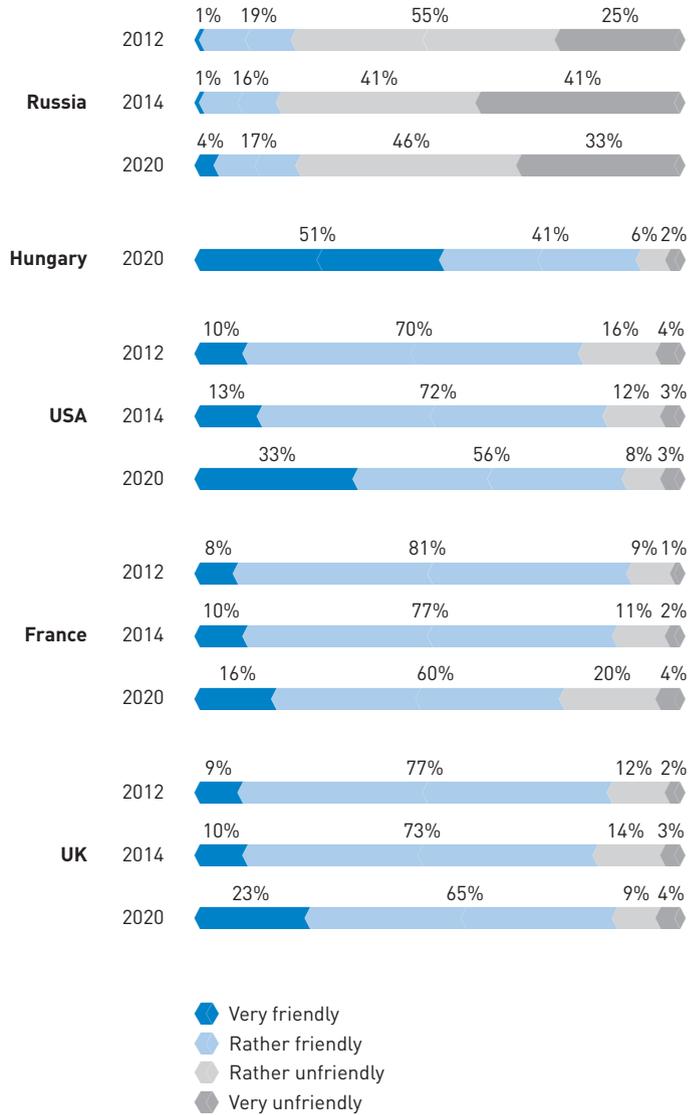
On Russia, Poles' views have returned to the position before Russia's actions against Ukraine starting in 2014. 21% of respondents now see Russia as friendly towards Poland, while 79% see its attitude to Poland as unfriendly.

This surge in positive opinions (and with Russia the return to the pre-2014 situation) can be

interpreted by several factors. The Polish public is constantly assured that national security is much greater than before, thanks to Poland's NATO membership and closer ties with the USA including the presence of American troops in Poland. This feeling of security is supported by the years of Poland's EU membership and friendly relations with neighbours and EU partners, as well as the country's economic stability.

On Russia, after nervous years of nervously observing open military action in Crimea and the Donbas region Polish public opinion is now facing mainly an information war. This is seen negatively but does not evoke as much emotion as those earlier events. Creeping generational change may have changed perceptions.

**Figure 6. How do Poles perceive other states' attitude to Poland?**

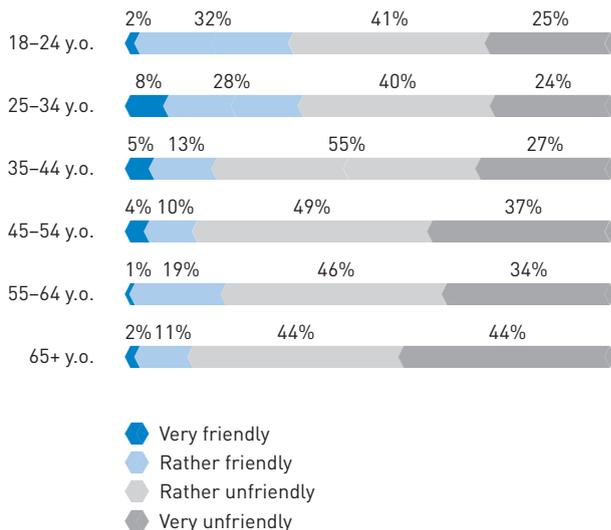


Assessments of Russia's attitude to Poland vary notably by age. Younger people (18–24 and 24–34) are much more likely to see Russia's attitude to Poland as friendly than are older Poles. 36% of respondents aged 24–34 believe this, as compared to only 13% of respondents aged 65 and older.

This is just one example of how assessments and opinions about Russia correlate with age. The simplest explanation of this difference lies in differing memories and the weight of experience. Those youngest respondents who did not experience life behind the Iron Curtain today see Russia in a more favourable light.

**Figure 7. How do Poles perceive Russia's attitude to Poland?**

*Distribution by age*



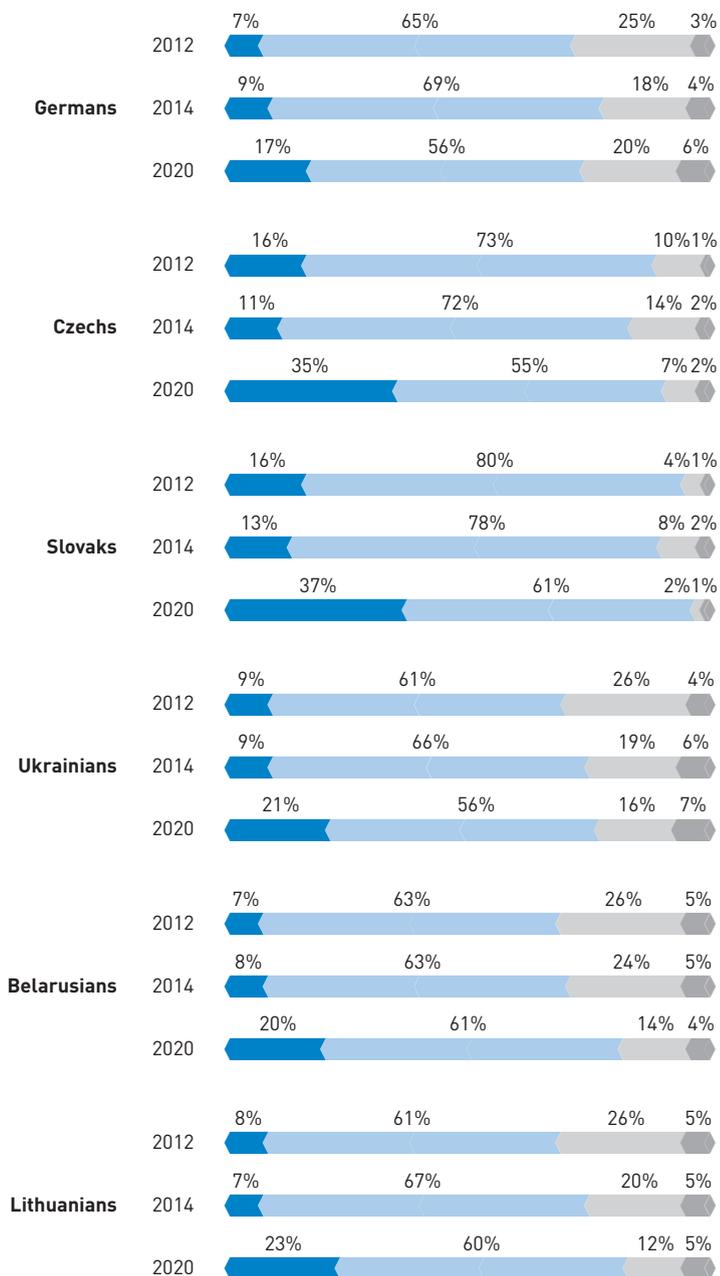
Poles may have doubts as to whether Russia as a state is positively disposed towards Poland, but Poles' opinions of Russians as a people are much more positive.

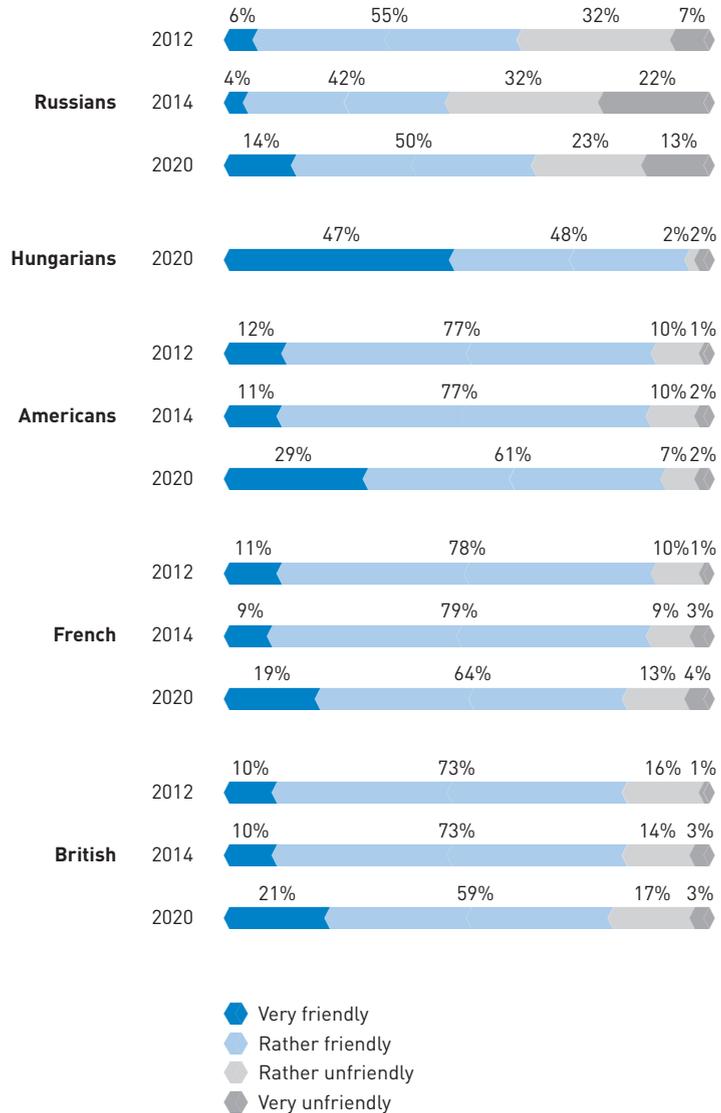
Recalling that the Russian state's attitude to Poland was perceived as friendly by as few as 21% while 64% of respondents assessed Russians' attitude as friendly, we again see that clear distinction. Poles believe that 'ordinary Russians' have a far more positive attitude

to Poland and Poles than does the Kremlin; Kremlin policy towards Poland is often perceived as unfriendly, if not openly hostile.

Such a gap between the perceived attitude of the state and its people towards Poland and Poles is seen by Poles only in the case of Russia/Russians. By contrast positive assessments of relations with our Eastern neighbours (Lithuanians, Belarusians and Ukrainians) are seeing a definite rise.

Figure 8. What is Poles' perception of other nations' attitude to Poland?





Even if the attitude of Russians to Poland is assessed more positively than Russia's attitude to Poland, among our seven neighbours Russians are perceived by Poles as much the most distant from a social and cultural point of view.

Czechs and Slovaks rank highest on the social and cultural closeness scale. Russians are

located on the opposite end, namely as most distant from Poles socially and culturally. Most respondents see Germans as the next most distant nation. Belarusians are in the middle. Ukrainians and Lithuanians are seen as more akin to Poles than Belarusians, but not as close as Czechs and Slovaks.

**Figure 9. Which nations do we see as the closest to us in terms of culture and customs?**

**Nation most distant from Poles**

- Russians – 5,4
- Germans – 5,0
- Belarusians – 4,4
- Ukrainians – 3,7
- Lithuanians – 3,6
- Slovaks – 3,1
- Czechs – 2,8

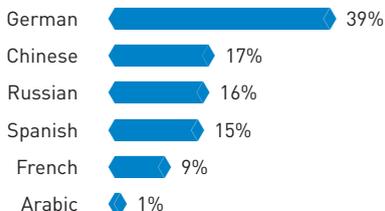
**Nation closest to Poles**

*NOTE: Respondents were asked to rank countries in terms of culture and customs from closest (value 1) to most distant (value 7). This chart presents the average ratings for individual countries in this ranking.*

The importance we attach to different countries, their cultures and their role in the world is shown in part by our readiness to learn foreign languages. English of course is well in the lead here, but it's interesting to find out which other popular languages Poles think are worth learning, and what they think of learning Russian.

Of the six languages mentioned in the survey – German, Chinese, Russian, Spanish, French and Arabic – German came first (39%). The least popular language is Arabic (1%). The benefits of learning Russian are seen as similar to those of Spanish and Chinese: 16% of Poles believe it's worth learning Russian, just as 15% indicated Spanish.

**Figure 10. Languages other than English which are worth learning**



# Russia's image

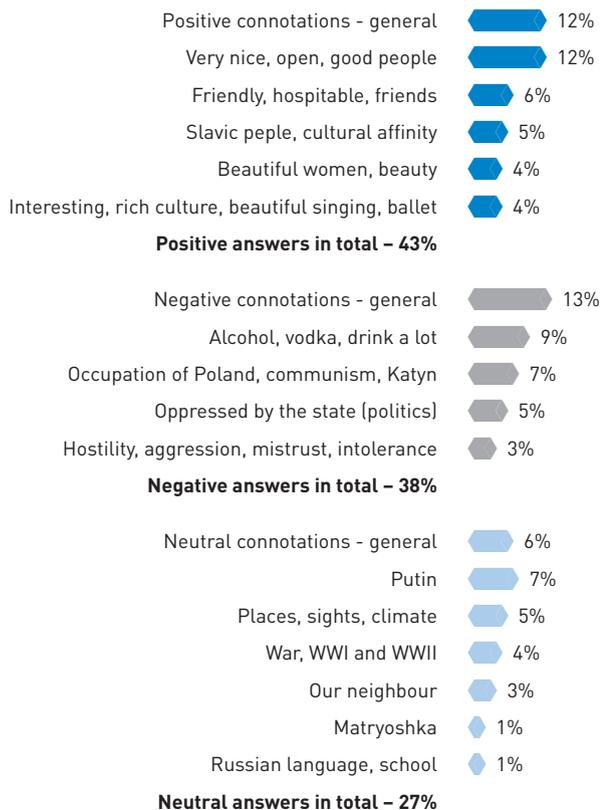
Poles' spontaneous associations with the word 'Russian' as answers to open-ended questions are generally positive or neutral. Positive associations typically refer to a shared Slavic identity, hospitality and other cultural similarities.

The most common negative association with Russians is alcohol, followed by political themes:

the 'poor' Russian people are contrasted with their 'bad' government.

Spontaneous associations also include neutral descriptions related to popular politicians (Putin), geographical areas (Moscow, Siberia) or famous places (the Kremlin).

**Figure 11. Spontaneous connotations with the word 'Russian'**



The image of Russia among Poles was explored through five contrasting pairs of values:

- modern – backward
- rich – poor
- democratic – authoritarian
- friendly – unfriendly
- worth visiting – not worth visiting

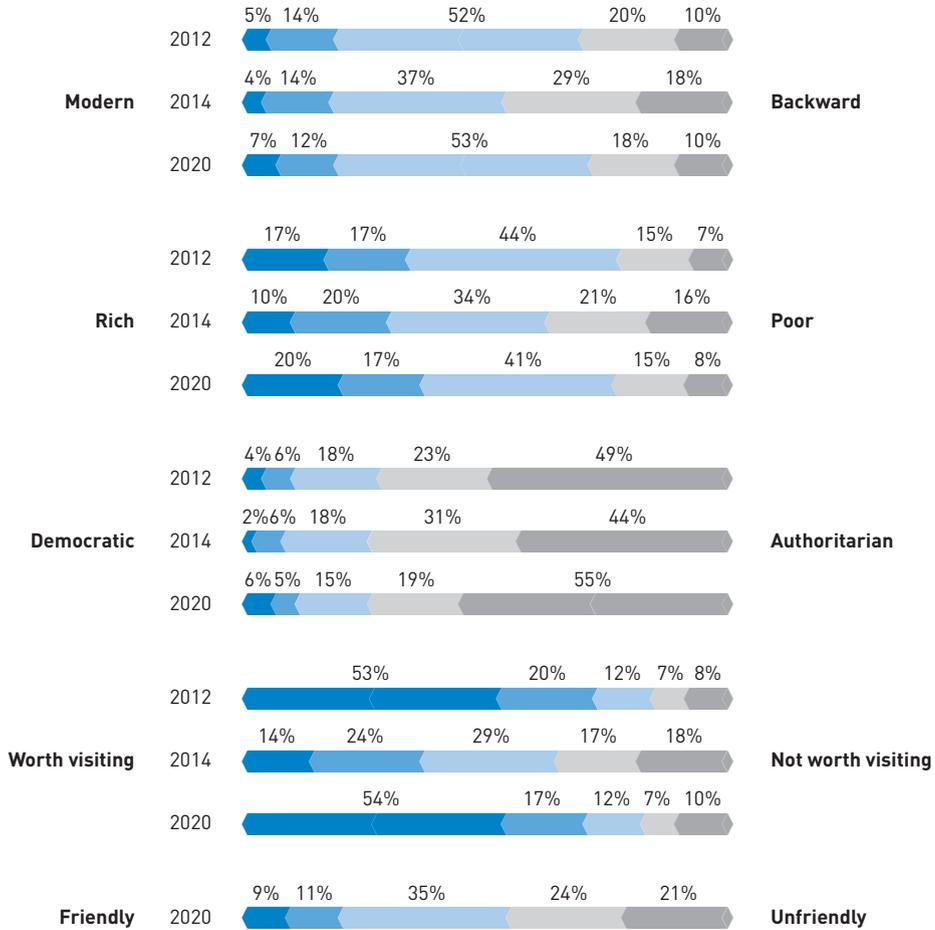
For the first category, the largest group of respondents gave neutral answers: they see Russia as neither modern nor backward.

Likewise for Russia's level of wealth, neutral responses were the most common, although answers indicating wealth outweighed those indicating only modest affluence.

Many more Poles (74%) see Russia as an authoritarian rather than democratic state (11%). A larger group also sees Russia as unfriendly (45%) rather than friendly (20%).

For tourist attractions Poles look at Russia much more favourably and with curiosity. 71% now see Russia is a country worth visiting; only 17% disagree. The attractiveness for Poles of Russia as a tourist destination has returned to the 2012 level; 2014 saw a decline in this respect as well, as only 38% of Poles saw Russia as an attractive destination.

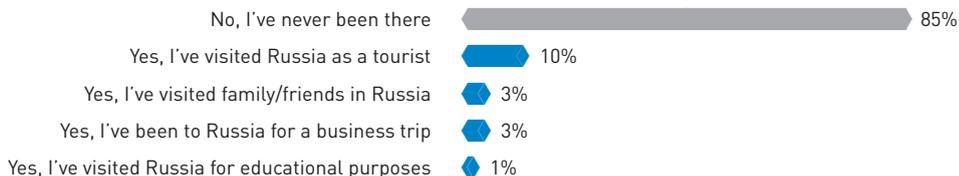
Figure 12. How do Poles perceive Russia?



Russia's attractiveness for tourists and Poles' willingness to visit it stem from the fact that as many as 85% of respondents have never been to

Russia. Only one in ten respondents have visited Russia as a tourist in the post-Soviet period.

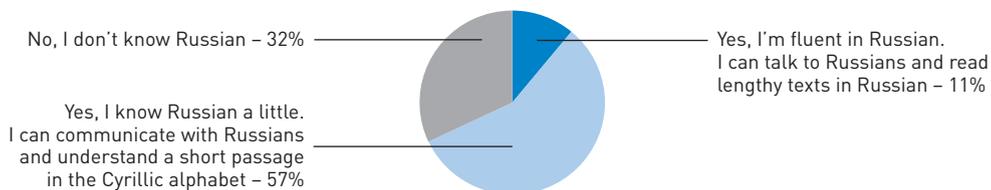
**Figure 13. Visiting Russia (after the collapse of the USSR)**

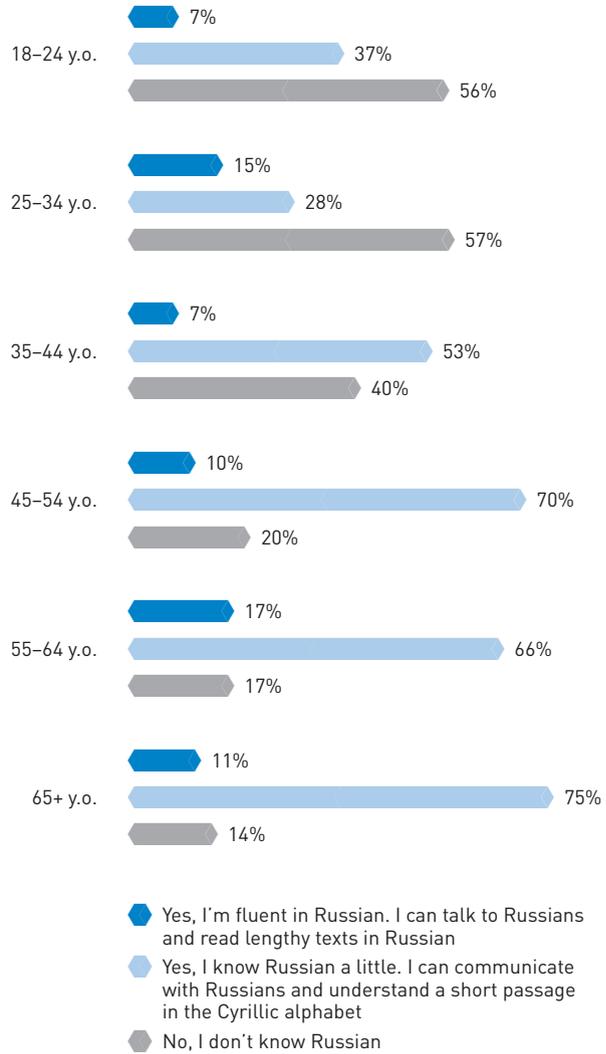


Two-thirds of respondents say that they have at least basic knowledge of Russian; 11% say they have a good level and can freely talk with Russians and read Russian texts.

Knowledge of Russian of course is much more common among people aged 45 or older who had compulsory Russian classes at school.

**Figure 14. Knowledge of Russian**

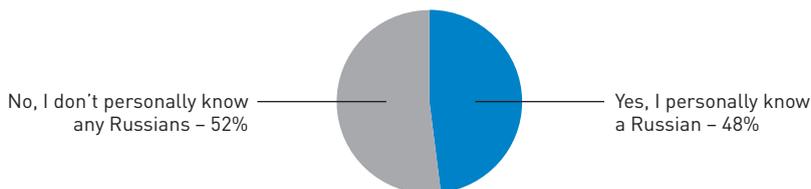


**Figure 15. Knowledge of Russian by age group**

It seems that Russians are not as frequent visitors to our country as (say) Ukrainians, but

almost half of Polish respondents (48%) say they know a Russian personally.

**Figure 16. Personal acquaintance with Russians**

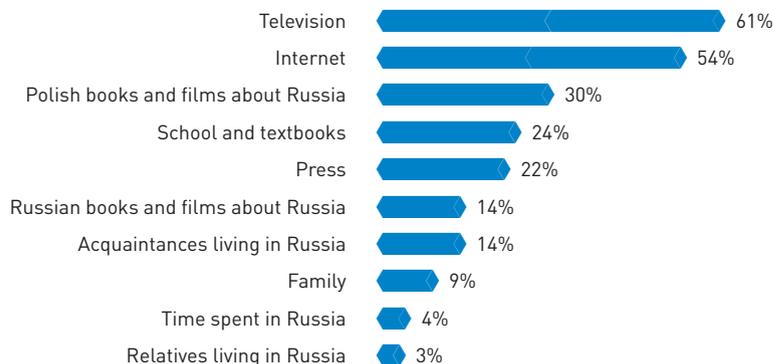


Respondents most frequently learn about Russia and Russians from television and the Internet (61% and 54% respectively). 30% learn about Russia from books and films. 24% percent of respondents (mainly young people)

mention school textbooks, while 22% read press articles.

17% of respondents draw on first-hand information from friends or relatives living in Russia.

**Figure 17. Sources of knowledge about Russia and Russians**



Using the Internet as a source of knowledge about Russia may mean getting information of varying quality, often not reliable or authoritative. The Internet offers valuable written content in articles and longer studies, but also videos on a massive scale that reproduce a range of stereotypes.

It is interesting to find out what online sources Poles use when seeking information about Russia. It turns out that the largest group of people using the Internet (69%) find their knowledge about Russia on information portals, while fewer respondents (39%) mention videos on such portals as YouTube.

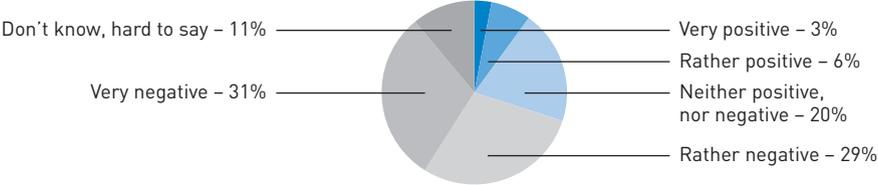
**Figure 18. Online sources**



# Assessment of Russia's authorities and policy

Respondents are very critical of Vladimir Putin's behaviour. Only 9% have a positive opinion, whereas the Russian president's policies are assessed negatively by 60% of respondents and neutrally by 20%. The remaining 11% have no opinion.

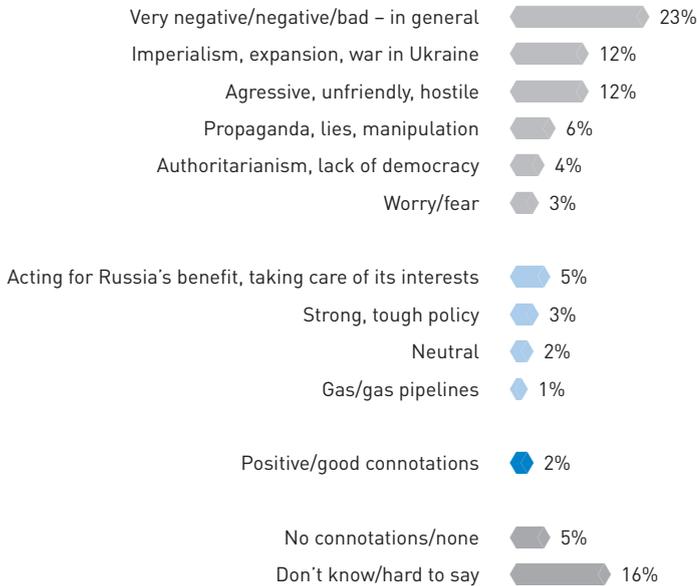
**Figure 19. How do Poles assess Vladimir Putin's actions?**



The phrase 'Russia's foreign policy' has broad negative connotations for Poles. It usually makes them think of imperialism, expansion and aggression and/or propaganda and lies and manipulation by the Russian authorities.

While few respondents see positive or neutral connotations in 'Russia's foreign policy', there are those Poles who see Russian authorities taking care to work to defend their country's interests.

**Figure 20. Connotations of the phrase 'Russia's foreign policy'**



When discussing these results we noted a distinction between Poles' perception of the Russian authorities (the Kremlin) and their views on Russian society and 'ordinary Russians'. This is a return to earlier thinking before the events in 2014.

On Russia's foreign policy Poles do not see consistency between the intentions of the Russian authorities and the will of the Russian people. This is shown by responses to the statement: *'Ordinary Russians have no influence over the Kremlin's activities, so they cannot be blamed for Russia's foreign policy'*. 76% of respondents agree with this. On the other hand, 39% agree that *'Blame for Russia's aggressive foreign policy lies not only the Kremlin but also*

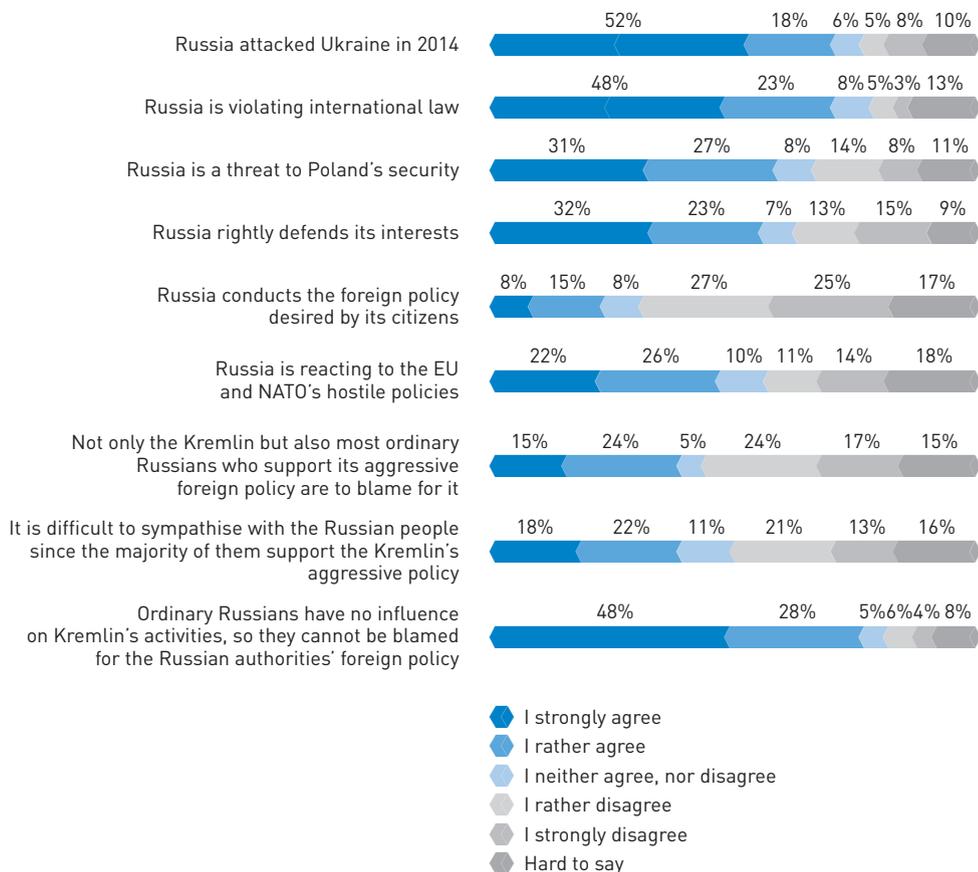
*with most ordinary Russians who support it'*. 52% of respondents disagree that Russia pursues the foreign policy desired by its citizens. Differences in opinions on these statements may result from different emphasis in the responses offered.

It can be concluded that not only do Poles have no general resentment towards Russians for the Kremlin's policies, but that they also they show great understanding for the complicated relations between Russian society and the authorities. However, a large group of respondents (40%) don't sympathise with the Russian people in this respect, believing that they largely support the Kremlin's aggressive policies.

A clear majority of respondents are very critical of Russia's foreign policy with regard to particular historical events and political themes. 70% of respondents agree that Russia committed

aggression against Ukraine in 2014. 71% of respondents are convinced that Russia is violating international law. Most Poles see Russia as a threat to Poland's security.

**Figure 21. Opinions about Russian policies and Russians' attitudes**

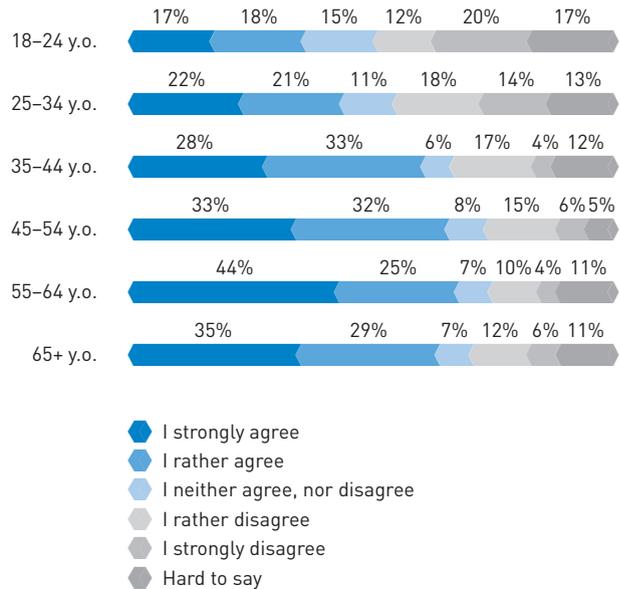


Older Poles are particularly critical of Russia's foreign policy and feel a threat from Russia to Poland's security. Generational differences are evident in responses related to evaluating the threat Russia poses. 69% of respondents aged 55–64 are convinced Russia poses a threat,

while only 35% of the youngest respondents aged 18–24 share this opinion.

This again shows how far individual experiences and historical memories influence how different generations of Poles see Russia.

**Figure 22. Opinions about Russian policies and Russians' attitudes:**  
**'Russia poses a threat to Poland's security'**  
*Distribution by age*



It seems that cultural and social cooperation could be a natural platform for Polish-Russian understanding. As many as 85% of respondents agree that such cooperation is desirable, although most believe it should be approached with caution because of the risk of manipulation and disinformation by the Russian authorities.

Just 9% of respondents want no cooperation with Russia even in cultural and social areas, since they believe that the best way to ensure Poland's security is to keep contacts with Russia to a minimum.

**Figure 23. Poles' attitude to cultural and social cooperation with Russia**



## Summary

After the clear deterioration six years ago among Poles of Russia's image as a state and of the Russians as a nation, in 2020 Poles have broadly returned to their earlier views. As in 2012 (then 61%), in 2020 64% of respondents see Russians as very friendly or rather friendly to Poland. In crisis year 2014 this proportion fell to 46%. This difference is even more notable in the case of the answer 'definitely unfriendly' given by 13% of respondents in 2020, as compared to 22% in 2014.

Against this backdrop, the perception of Russia as a state is not changing much. The percentage of Poles who consider it an unfriendly country is being maintained over the years (80% in 2012, 82% in 2014, 79% in 2020). The image of Russia described now resembles what it was before the deterioration in 2014. Most respondents see Russia as an authoritarian state, but one that is definitely worth visiting. As many as 85% of respondents have never been to Russia (following the collapse of the USSR).

The return to the former different perceptions of Russia and Russians is even clearer in opinions on the Kremlin's foreign policy and on how Russians see it. The thought that most Russians identify with the policy of their authorities finds less support than the claim that these two worlds are 'separate'. Likewise respondents show a very critical view of Kremlin foreign policy: they find it aggressive and in breach of international law, and so a threat to Poland's security.

Among the socio-demographic features that most strongly differentiate Poles' opinions on Polish-Russian issues, age has the most weight. Younger people aged 18–24 and especially 25–34 are notably more likely to perceive Russia more positively. The percentage of these people who consider Russia friendly to Poland is decidedly

higher than among the population as a whole. Among these age-groups other opinions and assessments similarly differ. Is this because younger people did not experience life during Poland's subordination to the USSR? Or is it a sign of some sort of political correctness holding them back from formulating more critical judgments about other countries and nations?

The reappearance of earlier diverging perceptions of Russia and Russians is accompanied by increasingly positive thinking among Poles about other eastern European states and nations. This is most clearly visible with Lithuania/Lithuanians and Belarus/Belarusians, and to a rather less extent Ukraine/Ukrainians. Is this a renaissance of Poles' thinking about the community of the region's states and nations, shaped by history and the contemporary security context? This turn towards our Eastern neighbours is an important finding of this research.

Traditionally Czechs and Slovaks and their countries are perceived positively. Such countries and peoples as Germany, the United States, France and the United Kingdom also rate consistently high in Poles' positive attitudes. It can be said that the Poles in this survey feel good among allies linked by a community of values. This makes differences in how Russia is seen all the more striking.

If we look in these results for a place to anchor dialogue and cooperation with Russia, it will certainly be culture and social life: one in three respondents favours unlimited cooperation here. A further 52% support such cooperation within limits resulting from awareness of possible Russian manipulation and disinformation.

Some potential can also be seen in language-learning, travel and interpersonal contacts.

Many Poles see Russian like Spanish as a language worth mastering. Travel to Russia and direct contacts with Russians are still limited, which creates a positive curiosity.

All in all, the latest *Social Diagnosis* points to certain enduring aspects of Polish thinking about Russia and Russians as shaped in the past. These may fluctuate in response to violent events, but after a while they return to the previous track.

This does not mean that nothing is changing. The marked difference in attitudes between younger and older Poles requires further research. The lower prejudice or fears of Polish young people towards Russia may become both a threat and an opportunity for building social dialogue with Russia, and for overcoming a fatalism of mutual resentment. That is in itself an observation of front-rank political and research importance.

## Notes



Polish-Russian relations are best analysed from a longer-term perspective combining permanent features of collective memory with sensitivity shaped by changing circumstances. This report presents the findings of a new public opinion poll that offers a better understanding of social perceptions of this complex situation in the broader context of respondents' perceptions of other states and nations. Does the deep crisis of trust in Russia and Russians revealed in the 2014 poll

after the war against Ukraine still persist? Or are we seeing a move back towards calmer feelings of the period before Crimea's annexation? Do Poles have different views on the Russian state as opposed to the Russian people as before 2014? Does the age of respondents influence their opinions on Polish-Russian affairs? Where might we find an anchor-point for social dialogue with Russians?



THE CENTRE  
FOR POLISH-RUSSIAN  
DIALOGUE AND UNDERSTANDING

**Centre for Polish-Russian Dialogue and Understanding**

14/16A Jasna Street, 00-041 Warsaw

tel.: + 48 22 295 00 30, fax + 48 22 295 00 31

e-mail: [cprdip@cprdip.pl](mailto:cprdip@cprdip.pl), <http://www.cprdip.pl>