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Poles' Perception of Energy Security and Nuclear Energy in the Midst of the Ukraine Crisis

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The escalation of conflict in eastern Ukraine strongly impacts Polish society, with more and more Poles expressing fears over the military and economic well-being of their country. In this reality, efforts aimed at increasing Poland's energy security through such investments as those in renewable energy production and nuclear power capacity are gaining importance. While Polish public opinion in general expresses its support for the announced construction of the first nuclear power plant in Poland, it is interesting to note the divergence between the mostly nuclear-enthusiastic east of the country and the much more sceptical western regions.

The Ukraine Crisis and Growing Perception of Insecurity. The dramatic events in Ukraine have created high tension among the Polish public and result in a stark increase in sensitivity to national security. Hostilities in eastern Ukraine between government forces and pro-Russian separatists have resulted in increased anxiety among a growing number of Poles regarding the potential negative consequences of the ongoing conflict. The highest level of perceived insecurity was recorded in March 2014 when Russia was seizing control over the Crimean peninsula, but even now more than half the Polish population still believes that the persisting crisis in Ukraine poses a threat to Poland's security. Furthermore, for the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, those who consider Poland's independence to be in peril outnumber those who see no such danger.

With no viable solution to the eastern Ukraine conflict in sight, and more generally with no signs of change regarding Russia's confrontational policy towards Europe in general, it is understandable that Poles are growingly supportive of efforts aimed at increasing Poland's military and economic security. Given Polish over-reliance on Russian energy resources, i.e., oil and gas, the issue of energy independence has gained particular recognition in the eyes of the Polish public. Among potential solutions, renewable energy (58%) and nuclear power generation (48%) are those favoured by the largest share of the society, with shale gas extraction (21%) and development of coal-based technologies (8%) considered as other potentially viable options. The relatively low support for the latter two may signify that Poles are persuaded that regardless of Warsaw's diversification efforts, continued reliance on fossil fuels will inevitably perpetuate energy dependence on Moscow due to Russia's role as the country with the largest global oil, gas and coal reserves.

Nuclear Power Generation as a Step towards Energy Independence. The crisis in Ukraine has brought to a halt the decrease in public support for the construction of the first Polish nuclear power plant observed since the Fukushima disaster and the subsequent decision by Germany and several other states to no longer rely on nuclear energy. The recent shift in public opinion is yet another example of how the Polish perception of nuclear energy

¹ This paper summarizes the first results of quantitative research undertaken by PISM on the topic of nuclear energy, based on face-to-face interviews analysed with the use of the CAPI system. The data were gathered in spring 2014 from a random, representative sample of 1,000 adult inhabitants of Poland. It is part of the research project "Nuclear energy in Poland: balance sheet and future outlook." In this text, the author also refers to a survey on Poland's security perception conducted in Summer 2014 by CBOS.

strongly depends on the international context. Currently, almost two-thirds of Poles support the plans to construct a nuclear power plant (64%). Among those in favour, the most prominent group is young people with secondary or tertiary degrees, with upper income levels and living in the largest cities. Pro-nuclear respondents point mostly to its potential role in increasing Poland's energy independence (57%) and, to a lesser extent, to economic benefits such as an increase in employment (42%), technological progress (26%), and the participation of Polish companies in the construction of the plant (24%). Almost two-thirds of those in favour (63%) would support investment in domestic nuclear power generation capacity even if Poland could satisfy its energy demand by buying it at a low price from its neighbours.

The fears associated with nuclear energy are gradually disappearing. More than one in two Poles sees nuclear power plants as an attractive and reliable way of obtaining energy (71%) which is not threatening (57%), and believes that the existing plants in proximity to Polish borders do not endanger the environment or the health and security of the neighbouring Polish inhabitants (64%). Here again, those least sceptical are young people from large cities with high levels of education and income. Among the potential threats resulting from a nuclear power plant deployment in Poland, most respondents point to technical failures and mismanagement of nuclear waste, with radiation and terrorist threats being mentioned only rarely. It is important to remark that in its majority Polish public opinion would not support environmental groups in their protests against the construction of a nuclear power plant (52%), with only one in every four Poles passively supporting such groups (23%) and fewer than one in 10 willing to participate in such protests (9%).

While the majority of Polish society strongly agrees that nuclear energy would bring economic benefits to Poland, there is less certainty as to whether it constitutes the most attractive of the various energy sources available—public opinion is split in equal parts among those who believe it to be true, those who think there are other, more attractive solutions, and those who have no opinion on the subject.

Important Regional Differences. There is a pronounced difference in perceptions of nuclear energy between eastern and western Poland. The voivodships with the highest support for the construction of a nuclear power plant include Kujawsko-Pomorskie (89%), Lubelskie (85%), Małopolskie (85%) and Mazowieckie (78%). Voices in favour are far rarer in Zachodniopomorskie (17%), Wielkopolskie (27%), Dolnośląskie (37%), Łódzkie (45%) and Lubuskie (50%).

Within the western regions of Poland, many state they believe there is a negative impact on Polish territory from nuclear power plants operating in the proximity of the country's borders, including on the environment as well as the health and safety of Polish citizens. In addition, the inhabitants of western Poland are more wary of the potential of accidents or even terrorist attacks on nuclear plants. In contrast, in eastern Poland, more people emphasise the likely economic benefits related to nuclear power plant construction and operation and point to a lack of viable financing as the biggest threat to such an investment.

It is no surprise that the ability to learn from the experience of other countries when it comes to designing, constructing, operating and financing the plant is considered to be of utmost importance for Polish society, nearly in its entirety (88%), regardless of the region. When identifying such benchmark countries, Poles point to highly developed continental European countries with decades of experience in nuclear energy provision, such as Germany (49%) and France (27%). Despite their equally important experience, countries such as Japan (18%), the U.S. (14%) and the U.K. (12%) were mentioned more rarely, perhaps due to the geographical and cultural divide looming larger than in the case of more proximate partners, such as Paris and Berlin. Only a small minority (5%) believes Poland should try to learn from the experience of Russia, which most probably reflects not only the current negative perception of it from the Ukraine crisis, but more generally shows scepticism towards the politicised character of Russia's energy deals with its European partners.

Outlook. Significant support expressed by Polish society towards nuclear energy is shaped by the current international context, i.e., the permeating feeling of anxiety caused by the events in Ukraine. As public opinion is aware of Poland's strong reliance on fossil fuels imported from Russia, it is strongly in favour of efforts aimed at increasing the former's energy independence, such as through the development of renewable energy sources and nuclear power capacity. From this perspective, the construction of a nuclear power plant is seen, above all, as a strategic investment to reinforce Poland's sovereignty, and only secondarily as an economically viable undertaking.

Thus, it appears reasonable to assume that in a scenario in which the conflict in eastern Ukraine de-escalates and Russia ceases to confront Europe, the high support for nuclear power plant construction among Polish society cannot be guaranteed. For actors, both domestic and foreign, who are involved in the future of nuclear energy in Poland, this points to the necessity of refocusing the public debate towards broader issues relating to the economic aspects of nuclear energy. Those elements, which are currently lacking, can serve to provide roots to the existing opinions and make them more stable and less context-dependent. The issues that should be spelled out relate, among others, to investment costs and financing possibilities, as well as potential economic benefits linked to the construction and functioning of a nuclear power plant. Designing a successful informational campaign would require the simultaneous and well-coordinated engagement of numerous actors, including central and local governments, as well as representatives of the business community, NGOs and expert associations.