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Polish humanitarian diplomacy and its capabilities

Abstract

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE: The main objective of the article is to analyze the issues that constitute the potential of Polish humanitarian diplomacy, including the specific political circumstances that have arisen in 2022 related to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine.

THE RESEARCH PROBLEM AND METHODS: The main research problem in this study revolves around outlining the elements of the process of conducting humanitarian diplomacy by the Polish authorities. The objective is to demonstrate that thoughtful approaches have been taken in this regard. The study employs various research methods, including document analysis, literature review, press review, and expert interviews.

THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION: The first part of the article presents humanitarian diplomacy as a theoretical concept, the second part describes strategic domestic documents, administrative and financial resources of Poland's humanitarian policy, while the third part analyzes the evolution of Poland's status as a donor conducting humanitarian diplomacy.

RESEARCH RESULTS: The analysis of the subject reveals that there have been symptoms indicating that the Polish authorities are striving to conduct conscious activities within the framework of humanitarian diplomacy, especially by creating international events and advocacy for Ukraine humanitarian needs on the international forum. It also exposes shortcomings and opportunities of "Polish Aid" in the context of current geopolitical conditions.

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CONCLUSIONS, INNOVATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

It should be noted that the issue of humanitarian diplomacy of Poland has not been extensively discussed by researchers. The article serves as a pioneering introduction to a comparative study on humanitarian diplomacies conducted by other medium-sized and middle-income countries, primarily from Central and Eastern Europe.

KEYWORDS:

humanitarian diplomacy, Polish aid, foreign aid, donor, humanitarian crisis

INTRODUCTION

Due to the outbreak of war and the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine at the beginning of 2022 and extraordinary whole-of-society response, Poland gained the reputation of a “humanitarian superpower” to use the phrase coined by U.S. Ambassador to Poland Mark Brzezinski (Brzezinski, 2022). Already in the OECD Development Assistance Committee Peer Review Report (DAC, 2017) published a few years earlier, it was assessed that Poland was becoming a more ambitious humanitarian donor and has had a solid, strengthening policy and strategic humanitarian framework. It was also noticed that Poland has had a growing interest in increasing the scope of its humanitarian action (with the remark of the attendant budgetary constraints). Meanwhile, the same country faced condemnation in 2021 for closing its border to Iraqi and Afghan migrants crossing from Belarus. An observation appeared in the latest OECD report (DAC, 2023) states that though Poland has an opportunity to increase visibility and reinvigorate ambitious strategic priorities of Polish Aid, as might assumed to great extent in connection with the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, it has not yet delivered on its aspirations in the field since its last peer review.

HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY AS A THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The state is a key stakeholder in the humanitarian sector, and the use of both development and humanitarian aid as a tool to achieve foreign policy objectives of donor countries is not a new phenomenon (e.g. ALNAP/ODI, 2022; Markovits et al., 2019; Lancaster, 2007; Morgenthau, 1962). Although in many cases humanitarian aid is a relatively insignificant area of state activity and the pursuit of its interests, also in comparison to development aid, involvement in humanitarian field is closely related to international, regional and national policy. As stated by one of the founders of the modern theory of international relations “while humanitarian aid is per se nonpolitical”, which nota bene distinguishes it from other forms of aid “it can indeed perform a political function when it operates within a political context” (Morgenthau, 1962, p. 301).

With growing humanitarian needs around the world (ALNAP/ODI, 2023) humanitarian assistance is seen increasingly as a tool for advancing foreign policy priorities. Foreign aid, once the exclusive foreign policy instrument of rich powerful states, is now being provided by middle-income or peripheral countries, too (Apodaga, 2017). There is a clear link between foreign policy objectives and the humanitarian commitment of states. Research proves that the way a state seeks to achieve or promote its own interests in relation to other states is a key factor driving its humanitarian commitment. And the way a state sees itself in a changing global and regional order has a fundamental influence on its decisions and practices (DAC 2017, p. 13; Taraboulsi-McCarthy et al., 2016). Finally, the way humanitarian aid is used by the state and whether it becomes its strategic political tool depends on the situation, and the wider context. Within the broad concept of “foreign policy”, there are numerous specific factors that influence the humanitarian action of a state. The most important are national security, including military factor, economic and trade interests, the achievement of international or regional influence or power (aid has been deployed to maintain regional spheres of influence and alliances), donors’ intentions, motivations, preferences with regard and posture towards the international system and international status quo. Certainly,

historical, cultural and religious factors also play a role (Markovits et al., 2019).

The concept of humanitarian diplomacy is a useful tool in examining the importance of a state's humanitarian aid for achieving the interests and goals of its foreign policy. According to Regnier (2011) or Lauri (2018) "humanitarian diplomacy" is not a well-established, precise concept but rather an emerging, circulating, fashionable term, similar to a wide range of new diplomacy fields such as climate, health or digital diplomacy that have appeared in recent decades, however it can be also treated as a rediscovered idea. The phrase "humanitarian diplomacy" – rooted in nineteenth-century history of humanitarian action – was used for the first time at the beginning of the 20th century by the American diplomat Oscar Straus, who distinguished it from the traditional tools of diplomatic services (Turunen, 2020). In the context of the Cold War, today's practices of humanitarian diplomacy began to mature, and their crystallization was accelerated after the end of the Cold War by new geopolitical conditions, the emergence of "new wars", the participation of non-state actors and increased humanitarian needs due to complex emergencies.

There is no complete consensus among researchers what the essence of this kind of diplomacy is. Some understand it primarily as the humanitarian organization's desire and purposeful action or negotiations to provide space for their work by political and military authorities (Minear & Smith, 2007) or as the persuasion of specialized organizations, forcing governments or in general decision makers to respond to crisis situations and obtain their support (Lauri, 2018). Other researchers treat this concept more broadly as an diplomatic activity carried out by multiple actors – both states and non-states actors – remaining in a network system. And still others emphasize its importance as peaceful, non-violent component of foreign policy of states (Ratajczak & Bros, 2023), which also means striving to achieve state's own interests. However, there is a consensus that its main areas of action include international negotiations, advocacy, awareness-raising and resource mobilization in emergencies (Regnier, 2011).

Humanitarian diplomacy is an element of niche diplomacy, which is sought after by medium-sized countries, relatively young and poorly experienced, as in the case of Poland. Many areas in which Poland could build its international position and relationships have

already been taken over by more prosperous, highly developed and influential countries (Szondi, 2009). States looked for areas that could be considered as niche topic for building their position through development aid, possibly one which had not yet been “reserved” by other, especially highly developed states. It applied to countries such as Norway, Switzerland and Canada, but also to the Central and Eastern European states.

The aim of this paper is to analyze issues that constitute the potential of Polish humanitarian diplomacy treated as a tool in conducting foreign affairs, including the specific political context related to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine. It primarily examines its strategic framework, sources at disposal, historical and current diplomatic activities in the humanitarian field and the assessment of the use of its potential by the Polish decision makers. To achieve that the paper was prepared based on literature review, documents, reports and press study and also expert interviews with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK AND RESOURCES OF POLAND’S HUMANITARIAN POLICY

Poland’s humanitarian policy framework is aligned with international guidelines laid down by, among others, the United Nations and the European Union such as “the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, “the Agenda for Humanity”, “the European Consensus on Humanitarian Aid” and is integrated into several national legal and strategic documents. “The Development Cooperation Act of 16th September 2011” provides a main, broad legal framework for Poland’s humanitarian aid. This document does not treat humanitarian aid as a separate issue, apart from art. 2, point 2 containing its definition. The definition reflects its most conventional understanding as „providing aid, care and protection of a population affected by armed conflict, natural disaster or other humanitarian crises caused by nature or man” (DCA GOVPL, 2011). The humanitarian objectives set out in the legal basis translate into strategic priorities through two complementary channels: the multiannual development cooperation

programmes and the annual “the Development Cooperation Plan”. It aligns with long-term objectives in disaster risk reduction field, which have natural links with development objects.

A whole of government strategy – the currently valid “the 2021–2030 Multiannual Development Cooperation Programme Solidarity for Development” approved by the Council of Ministers – gives some general outlines to Polish humanitarian assistance, primarily incorporating it into a modern approach assuming complementarity of humanitarian and development activities and supporting peace efforts (i.e. “the humanitarian – development – peace nexus” recommended by “the Grand Bargain 2016”, a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action). The strategic assumptions emphasize the importance of both the mutual cooperation of countries, cooperation with non-governmental organisations, specialised state agencies (including rescue services), other public administration institutions and multilateral channels, including special partnerships with international humanitarian organisations within the European Union and United Nations. The assumption was also made to undertake humanitarian activities regardless of geographical priorities (MFA, 2021).

In turn, in 2022 and 2023 the Development Cooperation Plans a priority issue arises, i.e. radical redefinition of the Polish humanitarian aid priorities in response to massive-scale humanitarian crisis in Ukraine created as a result of Russian aggression in February 2022. The fundamental goals set here include providing humanitarian aid to Ukrainian nationals on its territory and in other countries facing a humanitarian crisis due to mass migration of Ukrainians fleeing Russian aggression as well as providing support to countries dependent on grain imports from Ukraine and Russia, suffering from the impact of disrupting global food production and supply chains. Attention was paid to six countries in particular out of the 19 most famine-affected countries, the ones in a critical condition are following: Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan, and Yemen. The plans also emphasized Poland’s readiness to continue Poland’s engagement with helping its Middle Eastern partners, which have been heavily burdened by the consequences of the refugee crisis by the war in Syria (Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan), supporting the

populations in protracted crisis countries at a particularly high risk of famine (Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan) and respond to sudden and widespread humanitarian crises and disasters that are either likely to occur or already underway in other parts of the world (such as the Horn of Africa, Pakistan) despite the ongoing crisis in its immediate vicinity.

The Polish state's multiannual and annual humanitarian activity plans are part of the broader framework of Poland's foreign policy strategy i.e. Polish Foreign Policy Strategy 2017–2021 and Polish foreign strategy for 2023. The main tasks included in the strategic framework focus on building the image of Poland and enhancing its international credibility as an engaged and responsible member of the international community (in addition to strengthening security and supporting the socio-economic development of the country). One of the mentioned instruments to implement this assumption is the provision of humanitarian aid in the event of wars and natural disasters. It was emphasized that by undertaking humanitarian activity within the United Nations system, Poland should continue its involvement in issues that are priority for Poland, including preventing conflicts, counteracting new threats to security, protecting the population, considering especially the most vulnerable groups. There was also a provision about the need to solve the then migration crisis in Europe by pursuing the idea of flexible solidarity. This category referred to tackling problems at their roots, and meant, in addition to development assistance to African and Middle Eastern countries, providing humanitarian assistance to refugees. In Poland's foreign policy strategy in 2023, particular importance was devoted to the issue of supporting Ukraine, including maintaining the EU's involvement and involving the Three Seas Initiative (TSI) countries in this area. Poland's development cooperation with Ukraine was focused on preventing the humanitarian crisis and activities mitigating the impact of the war on the economic and social environment of Ukraine.

Humanitarian aid, although noticeable, is poorly taken into account in national strategies and plans of Poland. There are no extensive considerations on this subject in any of these documents. This situation is primarily the result of lack of state's strategic vision and oversight in the humanitarian field and some related issues.

In practice, political debate on and support for humanitarian (and development) cooperation or more deliberate direction across the government have been limited.

According to the 2011 Development Cooperation Act the leading role in terms of humanitarian aid is played by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The MFA's Department of Development Cooperation (DDC) as a single organizational unit remains responsible for steering Polish development and humanitarian cooperation, but its mandate and capacity to do so are inadequate (NIK, 2020; DAC, 2023). Existing within DDC structures the Development Co-operation Policy Council that was intended to strengthen policy formulation, providing advice, productive discussion, coordination and strategic oversight is simply ineffective. In general, there is lack of clear institutional roles and responsibilities and above all backed up by political leadership. Yet, the ongoing tendency to separate the delivery apparatus from political coordination makes it difficult to develop strategic planning and undermines the MFA's role as the lead institution (DAC, 2023). There is also little parliamentary or presidential oversight of the humanitarian programme (Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023; MFA Interview, 2023; Chancellery of the President of the Republic of Poland Interview, 2024). Such a political context has made it challenging to raise development awareness and advance reforms to strengthen Poland's humanitarian (and development) cooperation system. This aspect is shown by the situation with humanitarian support for Ukraine and the difficulty in estimating the amounts of Polish support and making them public (Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, 2023).

Information on the financial resources of Polish foreign humanitarian support seems to be blurred. There is no separate precise domestic data on expenditure on whole humanitarian aid. It is treated as part of Official Development Assistance (ODA) and currently constitutes the majority of these resources. According to OECD estimates total ODA increased from 0.13% (USD 702 million) to 0.15% (USD 984 million) of GNI over 2017 to 2021, exceptionally increasing to 0.51% of GNI (USD 3.4 billion) in 2022. The nominal ODA increase compared to 2021 was 255.6%. It was the highest of the 20 EU countries that make up the 31 members of the OECD's DAC. Thus Poland exceeded the target of 0.33% ODA/GNI by 2030 (MFA Interview, 2023) and

changed the previous trend when Poland's ODA had not kept pace with its strong economic trajectory.

The increase was related to Poland's above-standard response to the migration crisis caused by Russia's attack on Ukraine, support for Ukrainian refugees and increased expenditure on payments to international organizations (MFA Interview, 2023). In responding to urgent needs, Poland was able to mobilise significant additional funding including from the Prime Minister's Special Reserve, to address the humanitarian needs caused by Russia's invasion of Ukraine (DAC, 2023). Simultaneously the share of external resources in the Solidarity Fund has grown substantially, accounting for around 70% of the budget in 2022 compared to just 5% in 2019. The share of non-Polish funding was also growing further following the Fund's successful EU Pillar Assessment in early 2023.

The core Polish funding support responses to UN appeals and regular contributions to the Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF). There are both payments to other international organizations and specialized agencies as well as implementation of a great number of direct aid projects outside Poland by Polish missions abroad and Polish non-governmental organizations. It is worth noting that till 2022 EU contributions made up the largest share of Polish ODA (DAC, 2023). Solid links with the European institutions, multilateral organisations and Poland's 88 diplomatic missions worldwide ensure multiple channels through which it can be warned rapidly of an emerging humanitarian crisis.

THE EVOLUTION OF POLAND'S DONOR STATUS

Poland is a country that has been on both sides of the aid relationship. This is reflected in Polish Aid motto: "In the past we received help, today it's us who support others" (MPDC 2021–2030). Despite the fact that is considered a new actor among established donors, it has historical, Cold War experience of providing foreign aid as a member of Comecon and a representative of the Soviet bloc. It was a beneficiary of aid from the Western states and institutions during 80. and 90., then transformed from international aid recipient into donor. Obtaining membership in the European Union was associated with the signing

of international agreements and a set of EU regulations obliging one to be a donor. After Poland's accession to the EU and the OECD engaging in development and humanitarian assistance was perceived as an opportunity to appear on an international forum as a generous and responsible country (Drażkiewicz-Grodzicka, 2020).

Poland started building its own humanitarian (and development) capacity in the mid-2000s and for more than two decades its humanitarian policy framework has been evolving in response to international trends in humanitarian practice and policies (DAC, 2017). An important reason that aroused interest in the issue of direct humanitarian support by the Polish authorities and resulted in significant increase in expenditures from the Polish budget for humanitarian aid was the war in Syria since 2011 (NIK, 2020). Support for countries affected by the civil war has become one of the priorities of the Government of the Republic of Poland. In its priority supported countries in the East, the Middle East and Africa Poland uses the full range of its crisis response (and disaster risk reduction) instruments.

Through its presence at global humanitarian operations and co-ordination fora, seating on the specialised institutions' governing boards and financial contributions to multilateral entities, Poland takes part in shaping the international debates and has an opportunity to obtain an influence the organisations' strategies. It can contribute to their rules and influence the directions of international humanitarian cooperation in accordance with its priorities. Poland is part of the UN-OCHA donor support group and participates in the Committee for Humanitarian Affairs and Food Aid (COHAF). The United Nations clearly remains Poland's primary multilateral channel in terms of humanitarian assistance. The MFA prioritises UN humanitarian organisations for civil protection in conflict areas and to support humanitarian crises Poland is unable to access for security reasons (MFA, 2022). The Polish involvement in international disaster relief operations is also provided through the EU mechanisms, above all European Union Civil Protection Mechanism (UCPM), Emergency Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC) and the Euro-Atlantic Disaster Response Coordination Centre (EADRCC/NATO). In general it co-ordinates with other donors at headquarter level, essentially within the European framework. Polish engagement with multilateral organisations and extensive diplomatic network including

INSARAG (The International Search and Rescue Advisory Group) ensures good early warning of emerging crisis, fluid, efficient and allows a flexible response. Aid provided in this international format on the one hand supports Polish priorities in international organisations, and on the other hand finances activities that for certain reasons are not implemented bilaterally (due to geographical distance, complicated security situation etc.) (DAC, 2017; Suska, 2022).

During the UN's first-ever World Humanitarian Summit Istanbul in 2016 the Polish Prime Minister declared that Poland attaches great importance to being prominent and responsible in developing humanitarian aid around the world. At the same year talks on bilateral cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, one of the major international donors, took place at the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Warsaw. It concerned coordination, exchange of expertise and common exploration of opportunities in humanitarian and development areas (MENA Report, 2016). Three years later Poland became the host of Warsaw Humanitarian Expo: An International Exhibition of Humanitarian Aid and Development Assistance. The first event of its kind in Central and Eastern Europe served as an opportunity to network with top decision makers from the humanitarian and development sectors, including UN organizations and agencies, the EU Commission, as well as major domestic, international NGOs and the private sector interested in humanitarian assistance market. The event consisted of a fair, the Responsible Business for Humanitarian Emergencies conference, a procurement forum, and the Humanitarian City a platform for meetings and debates. In the three-days event representatives of the European Commission, FAO, WFP, UNICEF, WHO, UNHCR, UNDP, Oxfam, International Committee of the Red Cross, as well as DIHAD (The Dubai International Humanitarian Aid and Development Conference and Exhibition) and Saudi KSRelief (The King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center) took part (MENA Report, 2019). DIHAD's participation underscored its significance at the international stage in dealing with humanitarian issues. It makes wonder again that there was no continuation of that initiative in Warsaw, but in Europe a new humanitarian trade fair appeared. Till now there were three editions of European Humanitarian Forum (EHF) in Brussels.

In the final period of the Covid-19 pandemic (2020–21), after Poland significantly supporting partner countries from the East and the

Middle East, especially such as Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Armenia, Georgia, Belarus and Lebanon, Polish government response to the Belarus crisis border i.e. practice of consistent use of push-back, justified by the need to protect the Polish border and at the same time the external border of the European Union, has led to a humanitarian crisis (Bodnar & Grzelak, 2023). The reaction was strongly contested in European and international fora. There were allegations of being incoherent with its international obligations, commitments in terms of international human rights and refugee law. Next year following the humanitarian crisis resulting from Russia's attack on Ukraine, Poland became one of the most significant donors of aid to Ukrainians, above all to Ukrainian refugees and a key logistics hub for the supply of strategic goods to Ukraine.

Polish humanitarian diplomacy has clearly intensified in the area of advocacy, awareness raising and resource mobilization in the emergency situation in Ukraine. Three months after the outbreak of the war, Polish government co-hosted with the Swedish government the High-Level International Donors' Conference for Ukraine in collaboration with the presidents of the European Commission and the European Council. At the end of 2022, it organized the "World for Ukraine W4UA" humanitarian and economic summit, which was the largest meeting of the international community to help Ukraine in Poland so far (MFA Interview, 2023). The issue of support for Ukraine has been also an important element during the President of the Republic of Poland's foreign trips, including at the UN General Assembly. Moreover, Poland has involved in the creation of a tribunal for Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which was the topic of the meeting of representatives of the group of several dozen countries and international organizations creating the so-called core group, which took place in mid-2023 in Warsaw.

Parallel to strictly humanitarian activities Poland seeks to play a coordinating role in the post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine. In general one of the priorities of Polish development policy is to include Polish business in reconstruction programs as widely as possible. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs signed a host country agreement with the UN establishing the permanent presence of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) in Poland (PAP, 2023). UNOPS is one of the most important entities within the UN

System, co-creating the UN Global Marketplace, i.e. the UN purchasing center, which is the heart of the UN public procurement system. UNOPS is present in particular in countries with humanitarian and peace needs that require long-term reconstruction and stabilization plans. The Warsaw office is one of the most important UNOPS offices, responsible for tender procedures for funds that have been and will be entrusted to UNOPS for the reconstruction of Ukraine.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There have been symptoms indicating that the Polish authorities are striving to conduct conscious and coherent activities within the framework of humanitarian diplomacy. This is evidenced *inter alia* by initiatives such as the Warsaw Humanitarian Expo in 2016 that was the first of its kind organized in Central and Eastern Europe and Europe's largest trade fair devoted to global humanitarian and development aid or the High-Level International Donors' Conference for Ukraine and the "World for Ukraine W4UA" in 2022 and advocacy for Ukraine humanitarian needs on the international forum.

Poland's response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and increase ODA above its international commitments has presented a strong context for investing in more efficient and effective humanitarian diplomacy strategy and an opportunity to create momentum for enhancing its international credibility as a prominent and responsible member of the international community. With better links between humanitarian and other cooperation instruments, financial transparency and an increased investment in the field, efficient administrative and political coordination (with leading role of the MFA), giving importance to humanitarian issues in national strategies and plans, and adaptation to trends in the international humanitarian system by formal endorsement of a new version of the Grand Bargain for 2023–2026, Polish Aid could gain recognition, its niche character and simultaneously could strengthen Polish involvement in post-conflict reconstruction of Ukraine and elsewhere. In other words Poland should set clear targets to build its humanitarian donor position. Internal constraints should not prevent Poland from maximizing resources and benefits as part of

the overall international humanitarian response to the serious crisis in Ukraine and the Middle East.

Poland could draw on its humanitarian and development co-operation experience to inform its political efforts in Brussels including in the lead up to its upcoming EU Presidency and clarify how Polish Aid will benefit from future EU delegated co-operation, ensuring systems and capacities are in place to do so. Poland's 2025 Presidency of the Council of the European Union comes at a strategic moment, and Poland has an important opportunity to build on the response to Russia's war in Ukraine to raise awareness and show leadership. Stepping up co-ordination with other EU Member States in partner countries would also better enable Poland to leverage its presence and added value.

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