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## ON THE UKRAINIAN-POLISH FORUM OF HISTORIANS AND RELATED INSIGHTS ON POLICY MAKING AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

**Summary:** This paper focuses on preserving, translating and analyzing pieces of information on the 2015–2018 Ukrainian-Polish Forum of Historians, allowing for knowledge of this event to be spread beyond Ukraine and Poland. Through this article the author wishes to show that to the governments of Central and Eastern Europe, such as Ukraine and the Republic of Poland, history became a consideration in state policy, due to massive shifts of views on how to approach history between the era of totalitarian Soviet domination and the development of current democratic governments. Although it is something that would be considered outside of state purview in the West, possibly even called “undemocratic”, the government’s interest in how history is told to the population must be viewed in the context of both information warfare, and in how the countries of Central and Eastern Europe approach international relations. Because of this, the Ukrainian-Polish Forum of Historians, organized by Polish and Ukrainian Institutes of National Remembrance (differential in their approaches to what can be considered “shared history”) is of interest as an example of how joint discussions of history, attempts to find a common posi-

tion, or a compromise, were considered relevant and needed for policy makers in Poland and Ukraine. Analyzing the prerequisites of the events, the topics discussed at the Forum (largely concerning mid-20<sup>th</sup> century history of Poland and Ukraine), and its results we conclude that, although the differences on how Ukrainian and Polish governments viewed their countries’ history eventually led to the Forum stopping, the initiative led to new actions from independent actors trying to support the idea of shared forgiveness and modern Polish-Ukrainian unity despite different views on various historical events. That shows that politics of memory affect Ukrainian and Polish policy-making, allowing an alternative perspective on the theory of international relations, one that considers not simply realist expectations, but emotional attachments to a country’s past and wishes to see that past respected, or at least not actively opposed, by other nations.

**Key words:** history policy; history politics, IPN, politics of memory, politics of history, Republic of Poland, UINP, Ukraine

## 1. Introduction

The developed nations of the wide “West” hold views on history characteristic of the Enlightenment’s legacy: history should be told by impartial scholars, separated from the state as much as possible. This separation of study and teaching of history is practiced across both sides of the Atlantic, but things are not as easy for the eastern frontier of Europe. Coming down from the decades of “communist” dictatorships and oligarchies imposing a mangled quasi-socialist part-imperialist Moscow-centric ideology, the countries of Central and Eastern Europe ended up with figuring something unthinkable for the rest of the wider West: a state policy on history. The politics of history, or memory politics as they are also known, became an important part of state policy for former Warsaw Pact state that continued drifting away from Moscow’s resurgent geopolitical ambitions, including Poland and Ukraine. The result of such policies was the creation of institutes of national remembrance: the Instytutu Pamięci Narodowej of Poland (IPN) and its Ukrainian follower, inspired by the Polish example, the Ukrainskyi instytut natsionalnoi pamiaty (UINP). Although both organizations worked on cooperating with state actors on issues regarding various questions of the recent and not-so-recent past, most egregiously ones dealing with Moscow’s colonialist policies and various Soviet-era crimes against humanity. However, as the organizations were deeply rooted in promoting nationalist history via popularization, and both were government agencies connected with other state institutions, issues started to arise relating to the more modern parts. Turned out, despite similar positions on Moscow’s colonialism, Poland and Ukraine had their own issues on shared history, and praised historical nationalist organizations that the other side considered some of the worst enemies in recent history. The question was, how would one reconcile such seemingly irreconcilable differences that having a “history policy” introduced to both governments, so that they would not negatively affect current Ukrainian-Polish partnership? Obviously, discussion would be needed to look for a compromise.

During previous research on the topic of Polish-Ukrainian relations, we’ve come onto an important, yet overlooked, event for the scientific and cultural aspect of relations in 2015. Said event was the resump-

tion of the historical dialogue between the Ukrainian and Polish Institutes of National Remembrance (UINP and IPN) after a seven-year break. The key to this was the opening of the Ukrainian-Polish Forum of Historians, the first meeting of which took place on November 2–4, 2015 in Kyiv, Ukraine.

The goal of this paper is, thus, to illustrate and analyze the activities of the forum, to detail out its prime goals, proceedings, results, and reasons for the meetings stopping. The tasks of this paper, reviewing literature, materials and methods, and producing results are tailored to provide an English-translated review of the forum’s activities to an audience outside Ukraine, as this event from recent history hasn’t gotten much interest from foreign researchers, despite it being an insight into memory politics, diplomacy and the use of soft power in Eastern Europe.

## 2. Literature review

In the former Warsaw Pact countries of Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland and Ukraine, political processes are intertwined with issues of historical memory. During the development of independent countries, the emphasis in the understanding of the past has changed in countries that were closely linked to a common past under “communist” regimes (Strilchuk, L., 2018, p. 177).

Looking at the post-Soviet thought, we can find out that history researchers often agree that the new Polish and Ukrainian nations cannot develop separately in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without mutual influence. Thus, the study of cultural relations and common history became relevant. The socio-cultural aspect of Ukrainian-Polish relations is mostly revealed in the thorough works of Ukrainian researchers. The understanding of this component of scientific studies was facilitated by the research of L. Strilchuk and V. Strilchuk in the monograph 2013 “Institutional components of Ukrainian-Polish humanitarian relations and cooperation” (Strilchuk, L., Strilchuk, V., 2013). L. Strilchuk continued to study the cultural component of relations in subsequent publications, analyzing the issues of historical memory (Strilchuk, L., 2018; Strilchuk, L., 2019). The topic of the role of mass media in Polish-Ukrainian relations was revealed in more detail in the subsequent works of O. Dobr-

zhansky, L. Strilchuk, (Dobrzhansky, O., 2018; Strilchuk, L., 2016).

Polish scholars, like Ukrainian researchers, have paid attention to understanding stereotypes and myths generated by the historical past. J. Kozakiewicz and Z. Najder argued for the need to “falsify” the common history, especially its tragic pages in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The authors believe that understanding and unity is possible only if “the historical stereotype of hostility is abandoned” (Kozakiewicz, J., Najder, Z., 1997). The prominent historian J. Draus revealed the facts of honoring the memory of Ukrainians and Poles who died during repressions and ethnic conflicts (Draus, J., 2010, p. 35).

Ukrainian and foreign researchers have made many attempts to comprehend the socio-cultural relations between Ukraine and Poland. They analyzed main areas of cooperation between the parties, described their achievements and prospects. However, certain aspects of socio-cultural interaction, especially with regard to reconciliation attempts on historical memory, remain unattended.

One of the relatively recent attempts from Ukrainian and Polish researchers to analyze this issue came prior to the events discussed in this paper. In 2015, the common historiography tradition became the subject of research by scientists from Lviv and Rzeszów universities. They reviewed prominent historians of Ukrainian and Polish origin who worked at Lviv University during previous centuries. Researchers also exchanged their experiences of teaching the history of Central and Eastern Europe (*Istoriia ta istoriia*, 2015, p. 382). One way or another, this may have given the idea for government-affiliated organizations on “history policy” of Ukraine and Poland to further their cooperation.

### 3. Materials and methods

The research covers a limited timeframe from 2015 to 2018, concerning the activities of the Ukrainian-Polish forum of historians. The forum’s activities has not been a subject of any previous papers, and didn’t catch the eyes from independent researchers on free encyclopedia sites such as Wikipedia. As it is, most of the information regarding the forum as of 2022 can be found on news sites. However, back when the

forum was active, it was monitored by multiple researchers of Polish-Ukrainian relations, including the author of this article. As a result, links to obsolete articles from the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance which detailed the forum’s proceedings were saved, and thus the pages can now be accessed via Archive.org’s Internet Wayback Machine. The author hopes that the copied links will be of use to more researchers of historiography as an aspect of Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Aside from the forum’s own documents, information from mass media was used to illustrate the expectations from the forum in 2015 and the fall-out of the forum being stopped in 2018. As the goal of this paper is to present information on the researched forum’s proceedings beyond inner Ukrainian information space, most of the methods used here are concerned with reproductive information and its translation. Nevertheless, the study is bound by human study methods practiced by historians in Ukraine, particularly of note is the “objectivity principle” – although as a human being the author supports the idea behind the forum, the organization’s specific results can be criticized and, as the research shows, neither side admitted responsibility for the forum closing in 2018.

### 4. Results of the research

The first meeting of the Ukrainian-Polish forum of historians on November 2–4, 2015 concerned the basic aspects of Polish-Ukrainian partnership in the sphere of the policy of history. During the meeting various organizational issues were resolved, the organizers outlined further directions of cooperation, along with the terms of the next meetings. The number of permanent participants of the Forum (12 people) was determined and co-chairs were approved, them being professors Yuriy Shapoval and Waldemar Rezmer. The sides decided that the forum’s main topic will be the 1939–1947 time period, associated with the fiercest positions of historians on such topics as the Volhynian tragedy, Operation Vistula, World War II. One of the aspects of the discussion concerned terminology used regarding the Volhynian tragedy. This was discussed at the first meeting of the forum in the following reports: “Review of Polish research on Pol-

ish-Ukrainian relations in 1939-1947.” (speaker Professor J. Pisuliński) and “Inventory list of the problems of common history of the twentieth century” (speaker Professor L. Zashkilnyak). One can note – it is no coincidence that negotiations on the resumption of joint UINP and IPN forums began in 2014, after the victory of the Revolution of Dignity. The declassification of the archives of the secret services of the former USSR in Ukraine after the Revolution made it possible to discover previously classified factual material on history of Ukraine and Poland, especially the repression against Poles and Ukrainians (Institute of National Remembrance, November 2015).

Why did this revival happen in 2015? In addition to the need to develop issues for discussion between the researchers, the resumption of such a dialogue between the Poles and the Ukrainians with the participation of state institutions (UINP and IPN) can be explained by changes in the domestic political situation in the countries. In 2014–2015, both countries saw new political forces coming to power, both emphasizing patriotism in their election campaigns. Despite rather non-confrontational presidential rhetoric, the parliaments of Poland and Ukraine at that time have recently passed legislation that addressed the most “hot” issues in history (and both concerned the personae from the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalist, albeit from different perspectives). The historians set before themselves an informal mission: to return the problem to the realm of discussions between scholars, while establishing a connection that would allow for understanding between researchers and government authorities.

The first meeting, however, did not come out of nowhere. Research has shown that the likely start of this dialogue was a previous event: the official first meeting of the forum was preceded by a joint action of IPN and UINP together with the National Museum of History of Ukraine on May 19, 2015 – the opening of the exhibition “Destruction of Polish elites. Katyn-Action AB”, timed to commemorate 75 years since Soviet Union’s Katyn war crime. Polish historian Łukasz Andrzej Kamiński spoke about the need to combat any and all attempts to rehabilitate Nazism and Stalinism. He also mentioned the IPN’s readiness to hold exhibitions in Poland on history of Ukraine (Institute of National Remembrance, May 2015).

What were the expectations of the forum? The political scientist Przemysław Piotr Żurawski vel Grajewski stated that disagreements on history should not be a reason for worsening Poland’s relations with modern Ukraine, which are very friendly and very much needed by Poland. As he noted, today there are no significant anti-Polish circles in Ukraine, and Ukrainians will understand their own history. Looking at lessons from wider European history, he asked: “Did the French demand apologies in 1914 for the numerous English crimes committed during the previous thousand years of the Anglo-French wars, or did the British demand that France renounce the tricolor under which the Jacobins committed their crimes? The problem they had to solve was not the mutual crimes of their ancestors, but only how to stop the Kaiser’s army?” (Redaktsiya, 2015)

The effectiveness of the first meeting was demonstrated by the events of the following years. The second session of the Ukrainian-Polish Forum of Historians (March 2016) was held in Warsaw. Its topic was Ukrainian and Polish underground in Western Ukraine during World War II. Noting the potential of such meetings by historians of the two countries, the Ukrainian delegation was joined by the International Renaissance Foundation, part of the Open Society Foundations network established by American financier and philanthropist George Soros. Among the important results of the forum was the transfer of copies of 10 volumes of the Security Service of Ukraine’s archives about Waław Kopisto, an activist of the Polish resistance in the 1940s, to the Polish side (Institute of National Remembrance of Ukraine, 2016, March).

During the third session (October 2016, Kyiv), the sides discussed the anti-Polish actions of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in Volhynia, particularly the July 1943 events. The parties agreed to organize joint projects related to the situation of Poles under Soviet rule and repression of the communist regime against the Ukrainian community in Poland until the 1990s (Institute of National Remembrance of Ukraine, 2016, October).

At the fourth session (March 2017, Krakow), the issues of the Ukrainian and Polish resistance during World War II were discussed again. In October 2017, a meeting was held on the history of Chełm region. The very fact that five meetings were held with the support of the International Renaissance Foundation,

which encouraged the organization of new conferences, exhibitions, exchanges of materials, has shown that foreign organizations positively evaluated the effectiveness of previous initiatives. To promote the results of the forum, institutions began to publish the content of reports on Internet resources. The parties agreed to present the rest of the forum results in the form of a series of publications (Institute of National Remembrance of Ukraine, 2017, March).

However, the forum stopped in 2018 due to the adoption in Poland of the law on criminal liability for denying the criminal actions of Ukrainian nationalists in 1925–1950. This forced UINP to look for ways to change the format of the forum, which would take place in Ukraine, yet the promised change of format never happened (Polikovsky, A., 2018). However, that was the position of the Ukrainian side. Polish IPN disagreed, saying that UINP's Volodymyr Viatrovych's declaration was counter-productive, saying that the law would not stop researchers' discussions. The Polish side disagreed with Ukrainian notions completely: "Concerns about the safety of Ukrainian participants in scientific debates in Poland are completely unfounded and even provocative" (Polskie radio dla zagranicy, 2018). The UINP, however, did not consider such phrasing as proof enough for Ukrainian researchers' safety, while the IPN of Poland did not agree to a Ukraine-only format, and so the forums have stopped indefinitely.

However, we can determine the IPN/UINP initiative of 2015–2018 was not in vain. It is necessary to take into account the broad historical and cultural aspect of such actions. Thanks to the combined efforts of scholars and government institutions, preparations have begun for a coherent moral and ethical stance on the perception of controversial issues in history. Understanding has not yet taken place at the level of politicians and citizens, but the parties have begun to find a common position that could form the basis of dialogue in the future. After all, as Jerzy Giedroyc has shown with his work, true reconciliation and unification does not take place at the behest of statesmen, but through contacts between Ukrainians and Poles in literature, the press, cinema, and art. Trying to agree on a common position is especially important for the two countries, which are integrating into the latest European civilization, which is based on human rights, not on ethnic enmity or the lack of principles.

As Waldemar Rezmer said, only a careful discussion of the sad pages of history will lead to real, not just "officially declared by the governments" reconciliation between peoples. Referring to his experience of many years of participation in the "Poland-Ukraine: complex issues" seminars, the researcher praised the process of consolidating the truth about the events of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the historical consciousness of the Poles and the Ukrainians (Rezmer, W., 2015).

This initiative of Ukrainian and Polish scholars to "work on fixing previous mistakes" in the ideological aspect of the Polish-Ukrainian partnership could be considered a worthy continuation of Jerzy Giedroyc's work. However, even though the initiative was to fix old mistakes, it turned out that some differences ran too deep to reconcile even between the researchers. To better illustrate the difference between Ukrainian and Polish views on relations, it is worth quoting Andrzej Szeptycki, a participant in the "Ukraine in Twenty Years" International Conference and an expert at the Institute of International Relations at the University of Warsaw: "When Polish-Ukrainian high-level meetings took place, for a long time Poles came to talk about Volhynia, and Ukrainians – about the visa restrictions" (Boyko, V., 2011, November 30). The researcher has repeatedly noted the Republic of Poland's characteristic "romanticism" regarding both its own history and its exceptional importance for a number of politicians in relations with Ukraine (Szeptycki, A, 2008; 2010).

The fact that the attempts of Ukrainian-Polish reconciliation came from cultural and scientific figures indicates that the legacy of Jerzy Giedroyc remained not only one of the foundations of modern Polish ideology, but also a "bridge" between countries. A striking example is the response letter to the appeals of Presidents Leonid Kravchuk and Viktor Yushchenko, church hierarchs, and public figures to Polish society to apologize to Ukrainians for their wrongdoing. The response letter was signed by Presidents Lech Wałęsa, Aleksander Kwaśniewski, Bronisław Komorowski, members of the leadership of the first Solidarity trade union, and leaders of public opinion. This letter was published by the editorial board of the Polish magazine *Liberté!*, founded by the "*Liberté! Foundation*". Responding to the apology of Ukrainians, the Polish side said: "Thank you for your letter, and we ask you

to forgive the wrongs done to our Ukrainian brothers by Polish hands... John Paul II, Jerzy Giedroyc and Jacek Kuroń, as well as the presidents of our countries, worked tirelessly to unite, let us not forget their legacy” (Redakcja Liberté, 2016). In a way this signifies, that despite the disagreement that led to the forum being closed, the idea behind it, searching for a way to continue friendly relations despite different idea on the shared past, remained strong.

## 5. Conclusions

The research allowed us to show that the Forum of Ukrainian and Polish Historians organized by the two Institutes of National Remembrance did not achieve its stated goals, but managed to jolt further cooperation on the issues of shared history, despite the differences of Ukrainian and Polish official positions on them. It was a new initiative in history – unlike the previous French-German and Russian-Ukrainian attempts to create a shared history book, it did not simply come from independent historians, but rather from government organizations created to monitor how the issues of history are handled in the context of post-Soviet memory politics and modern information warfare. This allows viewing this set of forum meetings as not merely a cultural event separate from the state, but a part of the history of Polish-Ukrainian interstate relations. It shows us how important history is to government actors in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, and how different views on history across different nations is seen as something to be worried about when conducting diplomacy. Otherwise, there'd be no need for government attempts to tackle this topic and reach some sort of an agreement, or a compromise, or even a treaty to let both sides respect each other's views and conduct relations regardless. Eastern Europeans' reliance on historical memory when conducting contemporary international relations is, thus, something that should be recommended for consideration for western history and international relations researchers, politicians and experts. It shows that analyses of relations should not be based purely on the ideas of “realism”, “geopolitics”, or economics.

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