On the Contemporary Polish Perception
of Russian Intelligentsia

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Introduction

A number of studies have been published so far concerning the perception of Russia in Poland. Most of them are attempts at reconstructing generalized images of Russian state and society in Poland. Russia, however, being an important point of reference for Polish nationality, seems to have a relatively diversified and complex image in Poland – one which takes into account internal differentiation within Russian society. Besides the distinction between common Russians and Russian authorities, a distinction is often made between ordinary Russians and Russian intelligentsia. Given the special role of intelligentsia in Poland, many Poles also perceive Russian intelligentsia as a special and distinct part of Russian society. As someone involved in research on Russian intelligentsia for the past several years, I have decided to present some critical and subjective reflections on mechanisms that condition the creation of knowledge about Russian intelligentsia in contemporary Poland.

This paper will present, first of all, selected contextual factors that shape the production of knowledge about Russian intelligentsia in Poland. This will be linked to resultant biases that seem to characterize most Polish academic discourse about Russian intelligentsia. Most of the issues mentioned in this paper are, at the same time, problems characterizing the process of discourse production by Polish journalists and non-academic analysts of Russia. In this text, however, I have decided, with minor exceptions, not to refer to the works of specific Polish scholars, intellectuals or journalists whose research may be viewed as being affected by the very mechanisms I am describing. Instead I will focus my reflections on a general level of non-personalized critique, which will have the status of a hypothesis rather than a fully grounded, representative view of the questions discussed herein.

Knowledge of intelligentsia as self-knowledge

Let me begin my reflections on the Polish view of Russian intelligentsia with the issues of identity. One of the fundamental problems of Polish discourse about Russian intelligentsia seems to be that most of the scholars involved in that field are members of the intelligentsia themselves. Often, it is not only an elected and conscious identity, but also one rooted in family background, which means that it defines the social status of a given person in terms of several generations. At the same time one could argue that, given the strength of the intelligentsia identity and its social milieu in Poland, the humanities, social sciences, and, albeit in a more restricted way, Polish journalism, are ruled by the values and methods


of the intelligentsia ethos. As I have argued elsewhere, the “quality” of someone’s intelligentsia identity remains one of the key dimensions of social hierarchy in Poland. Even the definitions of the intelligentsia may be contested and subject to evolution. This forces all actors active in these fields to respect or at least take into account the intelligentsia imposed rules of the social game. At the same time this turns them into intelligentsia members or pretenders, irrespective of their will.

The effect of this mechanism is that a crucial part of Polish knowledge about the intelligentsia (both Polish and Russian) is generated by the intelligentsia members themselves. It is, in other words, mostly self-knowledge, which does not necessarily mean it is a fully self-reflexive knowledge. One may note that, in this way, it resembles the nature of knowledge about intellectuals and their definitions, which, as it was noted by Zygmunt Bauman, are also always selfdefinitions. At the same time it is worth pointing out that Russian intelligentsia often serves its Polish counterpart as a point of reference for its own identity debates, soul-searching and symbolic battles. This function of Russian intelligentsia in Poland often becomes even more important than its role as an object of study in analyses which are, at least formally, defined as descriptive or empirical. Thus, non-intelligentsia generated images of the group, to say nothing of any non-intelligentsia originating theoretical approaches to the intelligentsia, are practically nonexistent in countries like Poland. Even critical views on the intelligentsia are usually self-critiques. Of course, some of the authors involved in intelligentsia debates may reject this identity. However, it appears that practically none of them are able to distance themselves from the fundamentals of the intelligentsia’s worldview, which defines fundamental frames and values of the knowledge generated by Polish social sciences.

Of crucial importance is the way intelligentsia is defined, perceived, allocated supposed “duties” or “sins” etc. This affects the vital interest of most of those involved in the “games” in its field. In effect, discourse about the intelligentsia in countries like Poland is usually characterized by an emotional and strongly value-loaded character. Even if it aspires to the status of a neutral description, it is always affecting the intelligentsia’s internal hierarchies and interests. Russian intelligentsia may only play a marginal role in such games in Poland – mostly a useful point of reference, source of tales, source of exemplary biographies, hero or anecdote or fundamental notions such as “obrazownościenia” or the “newly educated class” (first generation intelligentsia pretenders). Nevertheless, Russian motives, after their recontextualization in Polish intelligentsia discourses, also acquire a highly politicized and emotional character as they become arguments in Polish political battles and discursive wars.

A recent example of this phenomenon was an episode in the political conflict between the main forces of the contemporary political scene in Poland. More precisely, it was a part of a long lasting conflict between the liberal and conservative factions of the anti-communist political elite, both of whom aspire to the status of “true old intelligentsia” elite. When the interior minister of the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) government – Ludwik Dorn – used the phrase “wykształcenia” to characterize supporters of the main opposition party at that time, the Civic Platform (PO), a long lasting debate started. As it appeared “wy-
The West as the key point of reference for the intelligentsia debates

Another crucial factor to be taken into account when studying the Polish perception of Russian intelligentsia is the peripheral location of both Poland and Russia with respect to the widely defined West. This seems particularly important in Poland. Among the implications of this dependence is the fact that a major part of the discourse in Polish humanities may be defined as implicitly (or occasionally even explicitly) directed towards a Western audience as the country’s main significant other. Its key message can be interpreted as a request for recognition of Poland’s belonging to the Western culture – its status of a fully “European nation”. This search for Western recognition is particularly clear in discourse of Polish intelligentsia in which the aspiration to Western and European identity is constantly emphasized.

This type of discourse is also well known in all other Central and Eastern European countries, wherein intelligentsia members address Western audiences in many of their debates. An interesting study about this role of the West in the Russian discourse of Polish intelligentsia appears in Maxime Waldstein’s paper, which analyzes discursive strategies of the famous Polish journalist and writer Ryszard Kapuściński. Waldstein, in his study of Kapuściński’s volume on Russia, emphasizes the Polish writer’s efforts at distancing himself from the Russians and other citizens of the Soviet Union he encountered during his trips. As Waldstein argues, Kapuściński employs a typical Polish strategy of relocating his own narrative as a manner of life in Europe to his significant others in Russia. This is supposed to make Kapuściński, as well as other Poles who use similar strategies, recognized in their “Central European” identity - constructed in opposition to an inferior “Eastern European” identity. In particular, Kapuściński needs Russia as “the other” in order to visualize Central Europe as ‘Europe’, (i.e., ‘normal’), or, at least, worthy of normality (and privileges from the West, as Perry Anderson reminds us). Furthermore, the Orientalisation and ethnicisation of Russia has a lot to do with estranging the attributes that have historically been persistently (however unjustifiably) ascribed to ‘Central Europe’, including ethnic nationalism, fetishism, a-historicity and backwardness. Moreover, Kapuściński’s strategy is, according to Waldstein, “also a symptom of the incorporation of ‘Central Europe’ and its intellectuals into dominant Western discourses and institutions. Simultaneously, it is an attempt to influence Western public opinion with the hope of getting a voice in setting such rules of incorporation.”

The mechanisms reconstructed by Waldstein seem to influence, to varying degrees, much of the Polish discourse on countries east of Poland and could be probably interpreted within the framework of the above mentioned model of peripheries competing for recognition from a Western centre. While Russian intelligentsia, as a close cousin of Polish intelligentsia, is most often excluded from orientalizing stereotypes of Eastern European societies, it may nevertheless appear in an unfavorable light in many Polish discourses; not so much because of any specific Polish authors’ prejudices but because of a focus on building a positive image for Western audiences.

One can note that culture, in particular high culture, may be seen as a compensatory asset in intelligentsia discourses directed towards the West. At the same time, the intelligentsia usually strives to contrast itself to the remaining part of society and present itself as the nation’s most “cultured” and most “Westernized” part - one which does not share most of the stereotypical weaknesses and typical characteristics of backward, Eastern European countries.

In this discursive quest to overcome the effects of the Western’s orientalizing gaze, a stereotype deeply internalized by Poles and other “Eastern Europeans”, we can point to two fundamentally significant under-dogs: internal and external. The internal under-dog is usually the local “people”, less educated, poorer and, first of all, non-intelligentsia factions in the society. Their members may be imagined as the helpless former workers of state farms, the homo Sovieticus or as conservative, Catholic and xenophobic petty peasants. In any case, they represent the intelligentsia’s internal orientation and incorporate most negative characteristics of Polish society, which should not, in the view of the intelligentsia, have the right to be viewed as agents of change, modernization and progress. Such discourse of the Polish liberal intelligentsia has been analyzed by Michal Buchowski, who, in particular, criticizes the use of the notion of “civizational (in-)competence” employed by several scholars in Central and Eastern Europe. As Buchowski suggests, this notion is used to implicitly emphasize the intelligentsia’s supposedly superior status and Western cultural identity. The debate on Polish intelligentsia’s internal orientalism can be related (and in fact has already been related to by Buchowski himself) to the debates on internal Orientalization with reference to Russia. One can identify similar mechanisms behind these phenomena, both in Poland and in Russia. What is, however, of particular interest in this context is that the elements of discourse of Russian intelligentsia which can be seen as orientalist or internal-colonialist are also used by Polish intelligentsia. Firstly, this is because, as mentioned above, they mirror their own discourse on the internal orientalization of the Eastern European under-dogs - like peasants, workers, populists, Homo-Sovietiсes etc. Secondly, such discourse, which devaluates the status of the ordinary people of the non-intelligentsia parts of societies, is usually compatible with the negative images of Russia actively reproduced by Polish intelligentsia. Waldstein, in particular, argues that Kapuściński “takes self-Orientalizing discourses of his Soviet informants for granted because they fit his project of de-Orientalizing Central Europe, i.e., showing it as civil, civilized, and European.”

This second usage of the orientalizing discourse of Russian intelligentsia is functional in the context of the role of Russia itself as Poland’s key external other. I have discussed such
uses of Russia in Polish national identity discourse at length elsewhere. There, my thesis was that such uses are clearly inscribed in the general strategy of imagining Russia as a threat – a less civilized, backward country with imperial ambitions, which are rooted in its identity from the ancient times of the Muscovy throughout the Russian Empire and Soviet Union; strategies which are vivid up to our present day all over Europe. This image of Russia has several important functions for Polish society. Among others, it provides coherence of foreign policy, justifies the strategy of integration with Western structures and, as has already been mentioned, is the basis of compensation for Poland’s complex of inferiority towards the West, or if we prefer, a counterbalance to the West’s orientalizing gaze towards Central and Eastern Europe.

These negative images are also used in the above mentioned general Polish intelligentsia’s quest for recognition from the West; its attempts to legitimize its own status as an equal partner and full member of the Western community. As mentioned, usually the image of Russian intelligentsia in Polish discourses is not as negative as the Russian state, or even quite opposite. It is, in fact, presented as the only “healthy” faction of Russian society. In other words, positive images of Russian intelligentsia are produced in Poland in such a way that they usually do not contradict the hegemonic negative image of Russia as a country. In this context we can encounter the opposition of the good intelligentsia vs. the bad Kremlin type. Most of the achievements of the intelligentsia are credited in such discourses to its account while, all of its failures are explained by the obstacles created by opponents - including government or the simple people.

This does not mean that no discourses critical of Russian intelligentsia are produced in Poland. We could again, Waldstein again, who accuses Kapusciski of orientalizing and, in this way, indirectly criticizing Russian intelligentsia. As he argues, Kapusciski’s “Moscow democrat” is a ‘minic man’ in Bhabha’s sense, i.e., “he is like us but not quite”. This interpretation sheds light on Kapusciski’s criticism of Russian intelligentsia. He argues that, although self-consciously liberal and Westernized, it is still fetishist, as is Russian culture itself. Its fetish is words. We can also find in Poland another opposite type of perspective on Russian intelligentsia, where it appears to be a black character in contrast to positively presented intellectuals. I have already quoted the famous critique of the Polish liberal media discourse by Andrzej Walingi in my earlier paper, but let me restate it here. Walingi argues that “there is no doubt that Russian oppositional intelligentsia represents a long, deeply tragic tradition of struggle with Russian statehood; that there are a number of reasons justifying its nervous, occasionally hysterical attitude towards any attempts of building a ‘strong state’ in Russia. However, it is not an argument for taking its opinions about Putin’s Russia as objective and authoritative. Just the opposite! Quoting the opinions of Sergey Kovaliov by Poles amounts to amplification of the Polish national neurosis by an equally intense, although different genetically and in contents, ‘anti-authoritarian’ allergy towards Russian radicals. The thesis that only democratic forces may ensure stability and evolutionary progress in Russia also seems very doubtful.”

On the other hand, however, Walingi’s article is not typical for the discourse of Polish mainstream media. It was published in a post-communist leftist magazine, while Walingi himself has lived outside Poland for several decades already. To sum up this part of the paper, one could conclude that images of Russian intelligentsia produced in Poland usually function in the context of discourse directed towards the West, and have, as one of their functions, provided credentials for a vision of the Polish intelligentsia’s fully European character. Russian intelligentsia may appear as both a positive and negative point of reference in these discourses, but references to it should not interfere with positive image of Polish intelligentsia as a vanguard of Western modernity in Poland.

Polish-Russian competition and images of the intelligentsia

Another important factor affecting the perception of Russian intelligentsia in Poland is the general historical Polish-Russian contest. It has, on the one hand, an aspect of the above mentioned competition for Western attention, as well as competition for the recognition of both nations’ “civilizational” achievements by the West. This is also a contest over Western recognition of the status of national cultures and histories - in particular accounts of national sufferings and victimhood. At the same time, it may also be viewed as a contest over the recognition of academic knowledge produced by the social sciences and humanities in both countries. This, in other words, an element of the quest for status of fully “academic” and “objective”, “neutral” knowledge about Russia. In this context, the stigma of the anti-Russian prejudice assigned to many Polish accounts of Russia is also an element of the important factors to be taken into account by Polish intelligentsia addressing Western audiences. One can certainly notice that Polish “Russophobia” is even a topic of systematic studies in Western academia. The element of widespread distrust of the objectivity of Polish discourses on Russia in Poland has been taken into account by all those involved in their production. Thus, given the fact that Polish images of Russia have to directly or indirectly challenge the stereotype of Polish Russophobia, Russian intelligentsia can be viewed as a useful metaphor - as a strategy in countering the accusations or suspicions of the prejudice of Poles towards Russia. Referring to the intelligentsia issue allows Polish authors to express a positive or even enthusiastic opinion on at least a part or aspect of Russian society. At the same time, contacts with representatives of Russian intelligentsia, as friends in particular, may, in addition to other functions, also be seen as serving the purpose of presenting oneself as free of anti-Russian superstitions. In any case, it is quite typical for Polish critiques of Russia to mention the fact that they have, at the same time, many friends in Russia - usually among the intelligentsia.

Besides the issue of Polish-Russian competition over recognition from the West, one can also mention the question of direct geopolitical confrontation between Poland and Russia. Its most prominent manifestation is the contest over cultural, political and economic influence in the zone located between the two countries. Ukraine occupies a most crucial place in this respect. The so called Orange Revolution, in which several factions of elites of both countries have been involved, is an excellent example of the stakes which are involved in Polish-Russian confrontation these days. Students of Russian intelligentsia may, of course, not be interested in the Orange Revolution or even Ukraine, to say nothing of other aspects of the geopolitical tensions between the two countries. All of them have to, however, be aware that the academic discourse they produce about the intelligentsia in both countries always has potential political implications and can be used in a context of overt political con

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14 Waldstein, 487  
15 Zarycki 2004  

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17 e.g. Taras, R. “Russophobic foreign policy in Poland: An elite or citizen artifact? From the Kaczyinski leadership to the Civic Platform policies,” Paper presented at ICCEES VIII World Congress 2010, Stockholm, Sweden 28 July 2010.
frontation. This is, in particular, the cumbersome privilege of Polish scholars, who live in a country where the intelligentsia still enjoys a relatively high status and remains influential in political debates. They can be confused with the status of its Russian counterpart or that of most Western intellectuals and scholars.

Polish intellectual elite discourse is in high demand in the relatively independent mass media, which plays a much stronger role in Poland’s politics than in Russia, and even some Western countries, where much less attention is given to intellectuals and the intelligentsia does not exist as a separate social group. The downside of this popularity is the higher probability that academic texts will be decontextualized from their original fields and recontextualized in the media’s highly politicized realm. Several Polish academics have experienced, for example, being quoted by Polish journalists and later by Russian authors who used their critical remarks in order to justify their own critiques of Poland - not necessarily in line with the original arguments of the Polish authors. Some Poles quoted in such a decontextualized way in the Russian media are later criticized in the Polish media for serving “Russian interests” or falling victim to “Russian manipulations” due to their “irresponsible” statements. These factors are, of course, impossible to control for an average academic. He or she is not able to predict when and for what reasons his or her work will attract the attention of the media or other institutions and how it will be used. I guess, however, that awareness of potential use of academic discourse in the context of the Polish-Russian confrontation may influence the way scholars formulate the conclusions of their research and in particular express critical thoughts on societies and elites of the region.

Informants of Polish intelligentsia

Another important problem with research on the intelligentsia in Poland or Russia is the question of informants - sources on the basis of which knowledge is produced and legitimized. Naturally, intelligentsia members are predisposed to serve as the main contacts for all researchers of former communist countries. Their prominent role as gatekeepers and mediators between Western scholars and other experts and their own societies has already been an object of a number of interesting studies. Insights into the mechanisms of interaction between intelligentsia members and experts from an Eastern European context have been, for example, provided by several studies by Merje Kuus. Kuus argued that in the early 1990s, a relatively narrow group of the intelligentsia elite almost monopolized contacts with Western experts and academics working on the region. Interaction between the two sides was, however, quite far from mere one-way communication. The Eastern European informants, although generally lower in their status, mostly played the roles of informants, suppliers of case studies etc. They were, as Kuus argues, usually able to influence, if not to manipulate, the perceptions of Westerners. This was possible by providing them with images fitting their theoretical frames and discursive styles. Kuus argues in particular that “the region’s intellectuals of statecraft do not simply adopt but also construct the Central Europe that emerges from Western security studies. Listening to foreigners is not simply a process of learning; it is also a strategy of telling Westerners what they want to hear so as to attract and retain attention and money”.


22 Kuus, “Intellectuals and geopolitics: The ‘cultural politicians’ of Central Europe”, 98.

Thus Western experts appear to be in many ways dependent on their informants, and the latter gain not only certain power over the former, but also all the status of mediators for the Western center - considerably reinforcing their status at home. The premise that images of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe produced by Western academia are largely influenced by selected fractions of local elites, and, in effect, they are allegedly formed partially in ways that serve their interests. These reflections point to mechanisms which seem to also operate in the case of Polish-Russian intellectual cooperation. There are, of course, several important differences; the inequality which is present in cooperation between Central and Eastern European scholars and Westerners (see also Buechowski 2004) is not at all clear and obvious in our case, which does not mean that these relations are equal. As I would argue, they are usually ambiguous and multi-dimensional with respect to their inequality. Another difference between the case of Polish-Russian academic cooperation in humanities and social sciences and Eastern-Western cooperation is the effect of status reinforcement. Such effects from contacts in Russia (for Poles) or in Poland (for Russians) are probably, if at all, marginal or restricted to some professional sub-fields in both countries. However, the effect of mutual dependence may be even higher than that of the case of CEE-Western interactions.

First of all, the informal usual friendship-based format of interaction between Polish and Russian intelligentsia members may be more prevalent than between Easterners and Westerners. Polish and Russian intelligentsia identities enable setting up close friendships not only because of the similarity of habituses, but also of languages, and, on a more abstract level, of discourses of both groups. Even if they are sometimes far from compatible, they usually seem more comprehensible and familiar - both in relationship to many Western and local non-intelligentsia voices. This interaction also seems more adequate to capture representations of Central and Eastern European realities. At the same time, one has to recognize that both groups’ discourses are heavily influenced by Western academia and intellectuals. They are also permeated with numerous intelligentsia-specific notions and values, which are usually better appreciated, even if not fully grasped, by Poles and Russians mutually, than by Westerners. This interaction may lead to conclusions such as: “Westerners do not really understand our experience”. In other words, there are some occasional intellectual anti-Western alliances occurring in the micrometaphors of informants and foreign experts on Central and Eastern Europe. All these factors may reinforce mutual dependence and, in particular, deepen the dependence of Polish intelligentsia members on their Russian contemporaries. At the same time, Russian intelligentsia members provide accounts of their country, or of even the whole region, which best fit the Polish intelligentsia’s view of Russia and are relatively compatible with Western discourses on post-communist societies. This creates situations in which intelligentsia members become primary sources of information on Russia, often providing not only “raw data” but a ready-to-use discourse well fitted to the stylistic needs of Polish and often Western academia and/or media. In addition, they possess necessary legitimization given the high status of Russian intelligentsia elite in Poland.

If we adopt a truly demonizing view of the intelligentsia as a group sponging off the society, we could draw a parallel between the critical view of contacts between the so-called Chubais Clan in Russia of early 1990s and Harvard University experts described by Jane Wedel in her seminal “Collision and Collusion”23. Wedel coins the term “transactors”, which emphasizes the trans-national identity of the two cooperating circles. Many contacts
between representatives of the Polish and Russian intelligentsia can be seen in a somewhat analogous way, by which I mean that the common intelligentsia identity becomes at times more important, at least subjectively, than national identity. In most cases of such transnational intelligentsia cooperation there are no serious material interests involved, as was the case in the venture of the American and Russian economists studied by Wedel. What is at stake, in our case, is the production of knowledge about both countries which may, theoretically, be accused of being disproportionately skewed toward serving the interest of the intelligentsia rather than representing the views of other parts of both societies.

The effect of overestimation of the importance of Russian intelligentsia

One of the principal outcomes of the above mentioned mechanisms exerting influence on Polish students of Russian intelligentsia is a tendency to overestimate its importance and influence. I see several specific reasons for this phenomenon. First of all, Polish intelligentsia members tend to subconsciously overlay their perception of the Russian situation with patterns of social and political relevance that they enjoy at home. As I have argued above, despite turbulences in status, the intelligentsia in Poland can be still considered a privileged and even dominating strata (in particular its liberal elite). Polish students see, for example, the national intelligentsia as a much more influential group than do Russian students of their own intelligentsia. Thus, that privileged position of Polish intelligentsia may be the lens through which Poles tend to view the relevance of this group in other societies of the region, in particular in Russia. In addition, overestimation of Russian intelligentsia’s role may be seen as serving the (usually subconscious) interests of Polish intelligentsia members, who may like to see their counterparts more influential so that they can pronounce their research as particularly relevant to the understanding of contemporary Russia. Moreover, given the fact that Polish researchers’ contacts in Russia are usually heavily dominated by intelligentsia members, the importance of that group may be naturally exaggerated because of its visibility to Polish observers as well as because of its influence on the Polish image of Russia, including its historiography. One can also argue that both intelligentsia groups are transnational allies, who see each others as instrumental in extending their influence on the homeland. Any of their successes make them visible to other members of the intelligentsia in Russia could, as it can be expected, imply the reinforcement of the status of Polish intelligentsia, both in Poland and abroad (in particular in the countries east of Poland). This, we can surmise, would probably make Russia a closer ally of Poland, and the intelligentsia members would gain additional advantages over other sections of the elite because of their connections.

One might also speculate that ambitions regarding reinforcement of Polish and Russian intelligentsia’s status (their imaginary “victory” over other factions of national elites) may be seen as another incarnation of the “new class” project: Such projects are currently abandoned as unrealistic political plans, but as I would argue, though without much evidence, they remain in the intelligentsia’s sub-consciousness as latent ideas. In this idealistic vision, success of the Polish and Russian intelligentsia could theoretically even change the global status of the intelligentsia itself and turn it from an oddity in terms of general societal...
jectivity only by means of reconstruction of one’s own position in a given field. There is no single “objective” view of Russian intelligentsia, or Russia in general. Polish views, and in particular those of the intelligentsia are no more or less objective than others. Despite being aware of the intelligentsia’s one-sidedness and the nature of its subjectivity, it still seems impossible to free oneself completely from these limitations. I am constantly realizing, when talking or writing about Russian intelligentsia and Russia in general, that I often commit the same “sins” for which I have been criticizing others, such as in this text. Irrespective of my will, my identity as being both Polish and a part of the intelligentsia determines the way I look at the social world; distancing oneself from this identity seems all but impossible. Changing this dependence would require rejecting both of these identities and distancing oneself from the community of Polish intelligentsia. But, even such an emancipation would probably imply assuming another no less partisan view.

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