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Return to Privatization – Essential for Poland's Economy

ANDRZEJ FAŁKOWSKI
Unprecedented strengthening of Polish defence

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Do the right thing: A Polish view of the Russian threat

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ROBERT KUPIECKI

Polish Presidency in the Council of the Baltic Sea States

Expert article • 3824

On 1 July 2025, Poland assumed the Presidency in the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). For more than 30 years, cooperation within the CBSS has focused on regional development. However, due to the worsening geopolitical situation, Poland sees a need to strengthen the political pillar of the organization and focus more on security. Poland's views are aligned with the recommendations of Wise Persons' report on the future of the CBSS, which was publish in May 2025.

Russia's illegal and unprovoked aggression against Ukraine has diminished regional security. Simultaneously to the war against Ukraine, Russia is continuing its hybrid activities in the Baltic Sea region. Consequently, Polish Presidency in the CBSS will pay attention to three issues: operation of the shadow fleet, threats to the critical infrastructure and disturbance to the Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS).

The Baltic Sea is known for its shallow depth and unique ecosystem with networks of waterway and archipelagos. The Danish Straits are narrow, busy and hard to navigate. A full turnover of water in the Baltic Sea takes approximately 30 years. Consequently, even a minor incident could have devastating and very expensive consequences.

The term "shadow fleet" refers to an informal network of vessels that are used to transport oil and petroleum products from Russia, bypassing the Western sanctions. Their activities finance the Russian war machine. Moreover, there is a long list of dangers that the shadow fleet causes, such as risk of collision and causing harm to the natural environment.

On the one hand, these dangers stem from the fact that the shadow fleet vessels are old, poorly maintained, lack proper insurance and transport dangerous cargo. On the other hand, the shadow fleet vessels deliberately engage in provocative behavior, such as Automatic Identification System manipulation, refusal to use pilotage in dangerous waters and ship-to-ship transfer in open waters, known also as bunkering.

Moreover, since November 2024, we are also observing the involvement of the shadow fleet vessels in incidents damaging the critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea. The Baltic Sea is vital for energy and data transmission, hosting a web of subsea cables – power lines, communication lines and pipelines. The disruption of critical infrastructure constitutes for Russia a low-cost, but high-impact instrument, which also allows for plausible deniability.

On three separate occasions: in November and December 2024 and in January 2025 cables at the bottom of the Baltic Sea were damage. These includes communication cable (Sweden-Lithuania), data cables (Finland-Germany, Sweden-Latvia) and power cable (Estonia-Finland). What the vessels responsible for these incidents had in common was travelling to/from Russia.

Poland itself has observed disturbing activities by the shadow fleet vessels above the SwePol Link power cable in May and August 2025. Immediate reaction of the Polish Navy allowed for the effective deterrence. Since January 2022, the Polish Navy is conducting Operation ZATOKA, which monitors and protects critical infrastructure located within the Polish exclusive economic zone in the Baltic Sea

Recently, Russia has decided to escalate its actions in the Baltic Sea by granting protection to the shadow fleet vessels. In May 2025, in the Gulf of Finland, Russian Su-35 violated NATO airspace in order to protect shadow feel vessel "Jaguar", which was being escorted by the Estonian authorities. Since then, we have observed Russian Navy escorting shadow fleet vessels and expanding capabilities to protect substandard vessels transporting oil. Growing presence of Russian Navy to secure shadow fleet may increases the possibility of further escalations.

Simultaneously to the shadow fleet activities and the damage to the critical infrastructure, Poland is observing serious Global Navigation Satellite Systems (GNSS) disturbance in the Baltic Sea region.

A study conducted by the Gdynia Maritime University and GPSPATRON shows that between June and November 2024, the GNSS signal was interfered for the total of 84 hours. In some cases, it lead to serious positioning errors, ranging up to 35 meters, which pose a serious risk to the safety of navigation and critical infrastructure. The study also shows that the interference came from a mobile source, which opens up another potential use of the shadow fleet vessels, confirming previous reports of high-power radio equipment being observed aboard these vessels.

Despite major involvement of means in war with Ukraine, Russian military assets in Baltic remain almost intact. In line with Russian Maritime Doctrine adopted in 2022, growing presence of NATO in Baltic Sea is defined as a source of challenges for Russia. The New Maritime Doctrine also indicates that Baltic Sea will be a place of increasing competition with NATO.

With Russia's such threatening behavior in the Baltic Sea, Poland sees the Council of the Baltic States as a useful forum of discussion on pressing security issues within the like-minded regional group, complementary to NATO and its structures. At the same time, the CBSS allows the states around the Baltic Sea to elevate their shared concerns at the level of the EU and to obtain founding for the regional initiatives, such as the Baltic Defence Line and the East Shield. The Polish Presidency of the CBSS plans to introduce new formats of consultation, where the Ministry of Foreign Affair's political directors and officials in charge of security policy could maintain regular dialogue. The security of the Baltic Sea states is closely intertwined and we need to work together in different formats in order to ensure safety and security of the region.

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Note from Ambassador: Past and Present

Expert article • 3825

My relationship with Finland is long and fruitful. Both professionally and personally. We spent six years here as diplomats in the last decade of the previous century. My children spoke Finnish to each other. Polish-Finnish relations were very good and friendly. Today, in addition to this, they are characterised by a strategic and allied partnership in the European Union, NATO and also regionally within the Baltic Sea region. Politically, economically and security wise, the Nordic and Baltic States and Germany compose the most important region of reference.

People now ask me how Finland has changed in the thirty years since I left in 1997. I reply that I can see changes, but even then you were one of the best-functioning countries and most organised societies in the world. And it has remained so. Poland, on the other hand, has changed dramatically. Poland is one of the flowering and prosperous EU-countries at the moment. What are reasons why Poland has become a such success story in Europe? A wise foreign and security policy, rapid integration with Western European and Transatlantic organisations and institutions, especially NATO and the EU. Skillful foreign service and diplomacy was instrumental on this path. The direction of the foreign and security stemmed from a consensus of political forces, including post-communists.

What followed has been an efficient use of integration instruments, the presence of allied forces on Polish territory contributing to geopolitical stability. Once again, Polish diplomacy played a significant role in this. But all this would have been meaningless without internal reforms, strong regional and local governments, including financially, and well-educated, entrepreneurial Poles developing their own businesses and attracting foreign investment. The fact that Poland is a market of 40 million inhabitants willing to spend their money and with a purchasing power almost equal to that of the inhabitants of Finland plays a significant role. Finally, there has been a hunger for success at the national and individual level, which the vast majority of Poles were deprived of due to communist oppression.

We have changed for the better, and so have most of our neighbours in the region. Unfortunately, one of them has gone down a different path. Russia. After a moment of seemingly heading towards constructive international cooperation, Russia has relapsed into imperialistic nostalgia and aggressiveness. The biggest victims of this are the Ukrainians and... the Russians themselves. Putin has caused a tsunami that is setting Russia's development back and subjecting it to Chinese domination. This policy is costing the lives and health of millions of Russians.

Among the countries of the world, Ukraine is paying the highest price for this Russian policy. Understanding this and recognising the importance of Ukraine's security, Poland and Finland are among the countries that provide the most support and assistance. Military, economic and humanitarian aid from Poland has reached approximately €30 billion. At the same time, Ukrainians living in Poland, whether for economic or humanitarian reasons, contribute billions to Poland's budget in the form of taxes.

As Ukraine bears the greatest defensive and military burden in defending its independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, it has built one of the strongest armies in Europe and is a source of admiration and inspiration for others, as well as a source of knowledge about the means, methods and ways of conducting modern warfare. NATO and EU countries are learning lessons and drawing conclusions from these experiences. Ukraine declared its support for Poland after Russia's drone attack on 10 September this year.

On the eve of the ZAPAD 2025 manoeuvres, Russia, in cooperation with Belarus, sent 21 drones, most of them unarmed, into Polish territory. This was an unprecedented attack, the aim of which was to:

- test the readiness of Poland's and the Alliance's defence systems;
- test the cohesion and solidarity of the alliance;
- intimidate the Polish public and allied countries in Europe.

In operational terms, the response of Poland and its allies was decisive and effective. All elements of defence, reconnaissance, surveillance, analysis and selection of response measures, were appropriate. At the same time, the situation has showed that the development of capabilities to defend against drones needs to be significantly accelerated.

At the political and strategic level, the response of NATO and the EU was extremely efficient. Finland condemned the attack in the strongest terms and took part in preparing appropriate actions and decisions related to it. Two days after the attack, NATO launched Operation Eastern Sentry, significantly strengthening its response capabilities in case similar attacks were to occur again. This is an extremely important element of strategic communication with the perpetrators.

Similarly, NATO is responding decisively to the ZAPAD 2025 exercises. These are strategic in nature and include elements of nuclear weapons use. They are smaller than previous ones, but this is not due to the goodwill of the organisers, but to Russia's commitment of forces and resources to the Ukrainian front. It is worth remembering that the previous edition of ZAPAD in 2021, a few months before the full-scale aggression against Ukraine, included these plans. After the exercises, Russian weapons and troops remained in Belarus and were used to attack Kyiv on 24 February 2022.

NATO is prepared to observe and deter during these exercises. As part of a series of manoeuvres codenamed Iron Defender 2025, the Iron Gate exercises are taking place in Poland until 25 September this year, with the participation of 8,000 Polish and American soldiers.

Poland, Finland and their allies are strengthening their military capabilities. Polish defence spending amounts to 4.7% of GDP. This year, we became the world's 20th largest economy with a national income of $1 trillion. Less than forty years after the end of the Cold War, Poland is a country of extraordinary economic success and a proven ally of the Western community.

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PÄIVI LAINE

Poland – Economic powerhouse and military might

Expert article • 3826

Poland's transformation over the past three decades has been nothing short of extraordinary. Once a post-communist state grappling with high unemployment and emigration, Poland has transformed into both an economic powerhouse and a key military actor in European security. Today, Poland ranks as the 20th largest economy in the world and displays the fastest economic growth in the EU.

In Poland, the threat from Russia is fully understood. The country is modernizing its armed forces with determination, which is supported by its strong economic performance. In 2025, Poland is spending 4.7% of its GDP on defense—with plans to reach 5% in 2026—making it the top NATO spender relative to GDP and setting a new benchmark for European defense. Experts suggest that only a few European armies—such as those of Poland, Finland, and Türkiye—are currently equipped to fight a war resembling the one in Ukraine.

The foundation for Poland's success was laid in the early 1990s, when it transitioned from a centrally planned economy to a market-based system. The reforms, though painful, created a resilient private sector and opened the country to foreign investment. EU accession in 2004 accelerated growth, bringing in generous cohesion, agricultural, and recovery funds that modernized infrastructure and boosted competitiveness. Poland has been highly effective in using the EU subsidies to develop the country.

Poland's economic output has more than tripled since the early 2000s. Cities like Warsaw, Kraków, Wrocław, and Gdańsk have become hubs of innovation, finance, and logistics. Finnish companies have found the Polish market attractive and invested significantly. For example, Nokia employs around 7,000 people in Poland—roughly the same number as in Finland—mainly in R&D. ICEYE is a standout example of Finnish-Polish cooperation, born from an Erasmus exchange at Aalto University. Founded by a Finnish and a Polish student, the space technology start-up has grown into a leading high-tech company which has attracted strategic investments from both the Finnish and Polish governments.

Unemployment in Poland, once among the highest in Europe, is now at historic lows. The country has shifted from being a source of emigration to a destination for immigrants—bringing both opportunities and challenges. Like many European societies, Poland must balance integration efforts with public concerns and cultural sensitivities. At the same time, it faces a serious demographic challenge, with one of the lowest birthrates in Europe.

Poland's proximity to Russia and Belarus makes it a critical frontline state for NATO. The country has become the main logistics hub for military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine, with over 80% of supplies transiting through its territory. When the time comes, Poland will be central to Ukraine's reconstruction efforts, acting as a logistical gateway and a valuable knowledge base on Ukraine.

The Russian drone incursion into Polish airspace in September 2025 underscored Poland's strategic vulnerability and its readiness to respond. Multiple drones violated Polish airspace, prompting a coordinated NATO response and the activation of Article 4 of the alliance treaty. The response showcased the operational capabilities and political unity of both Poland and NATO. It was also a serious wake-up call of the urgent need to develop defenses against drones.

The Baltic Sea region plays a vital role in Poland's strategic posture. Poland has significantly increased its cooperation with the NB8 countries due to shared perceptions of the current European security situation, strong support for Ukraine, energy cooperation, and the need to build regional resilience.

Poland is currently chairing the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS). Poland aims to enhance the protection of critical infrastructure—especially undersea cables and energy networks—against sabotage and hybrid threats such as GPS jamming and spoofing. It also supports countering the Russian shadow fleet. With all members now part of NATO, the CBSS can serve as a complementary forum for discussing regional security issues, including joint patrols, ship inspections, and mandatory insurance reporting for vessels in the Baltic Sea. These issues are of critical importance to all Baltic Sea states.

Poland is keen to learn from Finland's strong civil defense system and comprehensive security model. Both countries face hybrid attacks at their borders, including the use of instrumentalized migration by Russia and Belarus. As frontline states, Poland and Finland share a common threat assessment and benefit from working together on solutions.

Poland's dual rise—economic and military—positions it as a key player in shaping Europe's future. While internal political tensions and fiscal challenges persist, Poland's commitment to European defense, economic resilience, and NATO cohesion remains strong. From its transformation in the 1990s to its emergence as a thriving economy and one of the leading nations in the EU and NATO, Poland is an increasingly important strategic partner for Finland.

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MARTA PROCHWICZ

From alliance harmony to strategic choices: Poland's foreign policy reckoning

Expert article • 3827

President Donald Trump is challenging the foundations of the international order. Pre-existing tensions between the US and EU are now hardening into open rivalries. This breakdown poses particular challenges for European frontline states that have built their security strategies on American security guarantees and the transatlantic partnership. For Poland, this development calls into question the foundational assumptions of its foreign policy and forces the country to abandon its decades-long approach of complementary alignment with NATO, the EU, and the United States. However, this strategic dilemma has received limited attention in Polish policy discourse so far, with political leaders yet to openly acknowledge the fundamental challenge to Poland's traditional approach.

Poland's strategic doctrine for decades has been predicated on three pillars: NATO, the EU and special relations with the United States. This multi-institutional framework was designed to achieve maximum protection through the deepest possible integration with NATO, the EU and the US. This manifested in concrete policy choices rooted in the assumption that American and European security interests were fundamentally aligned. Poland secured enhanced NATO and American presence on its territory, achieved the 2% NATO defense spending target in 2018 and embraced comprehensive EU membership, including single market integration and legal harmonization. The country champions American and European military equipment purchases while engaging deeply in European defense funding mechanisms, continuously seeking increased American military presence in Eastern Europe and strengthening energy ties. Within this framework, the US-European partnership represented more than cooperation—it constituted the foundational architecture of the international liberal order. Through overlapping institutional memberships between the EU and NATO and institutional coordination, Poland could simultaneously deepen its Atlantic and European ties without confronting competing loyalties or strategic trade-offs.

This comfortable equilibrium, however, has come under unprecedented strain. Trump's presidency has transformed the United States into a disruptive force within the transatlantic security architecture. He has imposed tariffs on EU goods, threatened to acquire Greenland, suspended aid for Ukraine, denounced European tech regulations as attacks on American companies, and engaged with President Putin as an equal. European leaders are already showing signs of greater assertiveness—from maintaining firm positions on tech regulations to independent diplomatic initiatives such as the recognition of Palestine. Although Europeans face significant constraints in building consensus on confronting the United States, they appear increasingly unwilling to simply acquiesce to American demands. This dynamic is likely to intensify as Trump escalates his requirements for alignment, recently announcing that European toughness on China and India will determine US sanctions policy on Russia—effectively demanding that Europe subordinate its trade partnerships to American priorities.

Poland had already aligned with American strategic preferences before Trump explicitly demanded such alignment: spending almost 5% of GDP on defense, purchasing American LNG, severing energy ties with Russia, awarding nuclear power contracts to American companies, and sourcing roughly 70% of arms purchases from US suppliers. This pattern of voluntary alignment reflected the broader European assumption that American and European interests were fundamentally compatible.

However, this comfortable complementarity is now under severe strain. The emerging US-EU rivalry poses a fundamental question: could Poland be forced to choose sides between its key partners? The dilemma is particularly acute given the security context—Russian threats have reached their highest levels since World War II, Russia continues to test NATO boundaries, and the Eastern Flank cannot realistically be defended without American military support.

Despite clear evidence that Trump's policies are not in Poland's national interest, both camps of polarized Polish politics (the ruling coalition and the Presidential Palace) continue strengthening ties with Washington. Tellingly, Poland's rising nationalist-conservative movement has signaled readiness to embrace US demands for China decoupling—an approach that contrasts sharply with the EU's pursuit of trade diversification.

Poland's traditional foreign policy foundations— the unshakeable transatlantic partnership and equally stable EU-US pillars—are eroding. This convergence of external threat and alliance uncertainty creates profound strategic uncertainty for Poland. A deeper structural transformation is underway in which alliances and alliance partnerships will be redefined. Poland requires a comprehensive reassessment of its foreign and security policy framework that acknowledges the end of complementarity and prepares for an era of strategic choices.

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KATALIN MIKLÓSSY

A Great Power in the Making

Expert article • 3828

Poland has been shaping the European development in the 21st century gradually but profoundly. The key to Poland's rise is, ironically, its continuous disappointment with the Union's slow and rigid decision-making. Milestones towards the new international status appeared through major European crisis moments by out-of-the-box innovations. After the Russian attack on Georgia in 2008, the Polish administration proposed the Eastern Neighbourhood Programme. The new initiative recycled Józef Piłsudski's *Prometheus strategy* from the 1920s, aiming to bring light of freedom and fire of national awakening to small nations that had fallen under Soviet rule. This old idea was revised for EU-purposes with the ambition that by investing to democratic development of countries between the EU and Russia, they could be anchored to Western values, away from Russian influence. The next step in transforming the EU foreign policy emerged in 2017 when after a long struggle the Visegrad Group and its regional leader, Poland could wreck successfully the EU's refugee policy on mandatory quotas. Poland was again in the limelight in the border clashes in late 2021, when Belarus forcibly herded refugees across the border. When the Polish government pushed back those seeking to enter the country, the EU became more permissive. Encouraged by the Polish example, other border states enacted similar "push back" laws in preparing for the future, including Finland.

The most far-reaching impact on the EU of all, however, was the military reform initiated already in 2018, when Poland's constant warnings about Russia fell on deaf ears in the EU, in the aftermaths of Crimea. Polish parties arrived at a consensus that it was necessary to be self-reliant in defence since the NATO could not be fully trusted due to its weakest link, Germany with traditionally cordial Russia-relations. Frustration drove Poland to carry out a comprehensive reform by increasing defence budget over the years near to 5 percent of GDP, modernized military infrastructure and invested into new armaments for all types. The Polish defence industry began to flourish and expand, as an important economic side effect. After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, all input to the military accelerated even further. According to current plans, by 2030 defence budget could reach 7 percent of GDP, the army's manpower would increase to 300,000, the biggest standing army in the EU. Poland is rapidly becoming Europe's strongest military force, and it is a very good news for Finland because regional security in the Baltic Sea area is priority for Poland.

But Poles like to think big. Especially when remembering the two centuries long Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that covered one million square kilometres and had 11 million inhabitants. It was one of the largest European powers of its time, comprising the Baltics, Belarus, Ukraine and extending deep into Russia. Poland has sought to restore its old greatness by revisiting once again a remarkable interwar idea, the Intermarium, an alliance of the countries between the Baltic and the Black Sea. Now, it is Trimarium, adding the Adriatic to the security zone with using the EU framework and acceptance as relevant scenario in defence against Russia. Poland has another strength that most EU states envy: the traditionally good relations with the United States, regardless of who is sitting in the White House or in the PM's office in Warsaw. The US has provided an extra security guarantee on the top of the NATO – as a bilateral deal.

There is only one obstacle to Poland's path to become a truly great international power, and that is the "Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs" phenomenon. When PiS came to power in 2015, its leader Kaczyński followed the Hungarian path in centralizing power. However, with Donald Tusk's 13-party grand coalition, Poland was supposed turning a new page. In the eastern EU member states, national-conservative, EU-critical parties have grown into the largest political forces in their countries. Against them, the opposition consists right-wing and left-wing parties, who have withered into small factions. In other words, they must cooperate to come to power. But the problem of the dwarfs is that when they finally succeed in their only common goal, ideological differences resurface in the everyday decision-making. And that can be fatal, because the PiS is just waiting to roar back to power if coalitions fail, even stronger. The outcome of this summer's presidential election was warning sign of the rising and aggressive Snow White, ready take advantage of the dwarfs' occurring weakness.

Yet, maybe Poland is, after all, showing again a model. The last European parliamentary elections in 2024 EU testified that conservative and nationalist parties have generally won. In Poland, three parties together won 47 out of 53 MEPs: the barely moderate conservative Civic Platform (Platforma Obywatelska, PO), the national conservative PiS, and the far-right Konfederacja. The latest European development indicates that we are entering a new conservative era, and Poland is ahead of the current trend. This highlights its potential to lead this new version of Europe.

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JAN ZIELONKA

Poland punches below its weight

Expert article • 3829

At the symbolic meeting in the White House in August eight European leaders discussed with President Trump the future of war and peace in Europe. Among them was Finland's President, but nobody from Poland. Finland, like Poland has a very special experience in handling Russia and both states have bright and respected leaders, Alexander Stubb and Donald Tusk, the latter was President of the European Council and head of the PPE, the largest party in the European Parliament. Although average Finn is wealthier than average Pole, Poland has much higher GDP and spends much more on defence. [1] Why has Poland failed to sit at the table deciding the future of the old continent? As the old saying goes: "if you are not on the table than you are probably on the menu", which means that interests and needs of those not actively involved in the decision-making process are likely to be ignored.

Poland's dire international standing stems from its conflict-ridden domestic politics. If politicians from opposing parties insult each other rather than striking compromises, the notion of a common national interest is fictional. How can a country punch its weight if there is no consensus on such basic international issues as the war in Ukraine, European integration or relations with the Trump administration in the United States?

Of course, polarisation is a daily bread of contemporary politics, but in Poland polarisation assumed extraordinary proportions by any standards, including the Polish ones. The peculiar constitutional set up is largely responsible for that. Poland's President has limited formal powers but is chosen in direct elections which offers him a powerful political leverage over the executive and legislation. (Unlike in Finland, all Poland's Presidents were men, unfortunately). Since 2023 Poland's government is formed by a coalition of the centre-left-and-right parties, but the President is from the opposite camp that can be labelled as illiberal right. The governing coalition was hoping that the presidential elections of this summer will result in the victory of their own man, but the opposite has happened. And so, the political ping-pong continues, not just regarding successive legislative proposals vetoed by the President, but also regarding Poland's foreign policy. The President is formally a chief commander of the armed forces, and he has also some representative prerogatives in foreign affairs which can and often are misused. Moreover, President Trump clearly prefers an illiberal and Eurosceptic politician such as the new President Nawrocki over his political opponent, Prime Minister Tusk. Needless to say, Mr Tusk is more popular in the EU than Mr Nawrocki which further complicates Poland's international standing.

We do not know who issued invitations to the historic meeting in Washington in August, but it is clear that the White House and the Berlaymont building in Brussels would have problems to agree on Poland's invitee and Polish conflicted politicians may not be of much help. Poland's President refuses even to endorse the foreign office's candidate for the ambassador in Washington D.C. Where the list of European invitees compiled in Kiev, the choice would not be easy either. The former Poland's President, Mr. Duda was a strong supporter of Ukraine, but the new President talks more about Ukraine's historical crimes against Poland than about the current Russian crimes against Ukraine. Mr Tusk formally supports Ukraine's struggle against the Russian invasion, but he refuses to contemplate sending Polish troops for a possible peace-keeping mission to Ukraine. His policies towards Ukrainian refugees residing in Poland are also increasingly half-hearted, to put it mildly. Under pressure of the illiberal right, Mr Tusk has even complicated Poland's relations with Germany and the EU as such which only begs the question what Poland's foreign policy really stands for.

True, foreign policies are often hostage to domestic politics, but one would think that Poland's history and geography would temper domestic political infighting and make the elites behaving responsibly when it comes to the vital interests of their country. Unfortunately, the "Polish-Polish war" goes on with no prospect of happy ending. This is bad news not only for Poland, but also for Poland's allies. Poland used to be an active if not enthusiastic member of both the EU and NATO, and gross of the Western assistance to Ukraine passes through Poland for logistical reasons. Poland's historic contribution to resisting the evils of Nazism and communism should also be mentioned here. Today, as in the past, Europe needs Poland to fight the ghosts of nativist imperialism resurging in various corners of the old continent. If you have friends or colleagues in Poland, please tell them sternly: wake up folks and get your acts together because we need your precious contribution to peace and prosperity.

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His latest book *'The Lost Future and How to reclaim It'* was published by Yale University Press in 2023.

1 *https://countryeconomy.com/countries/compare/poland/finland*

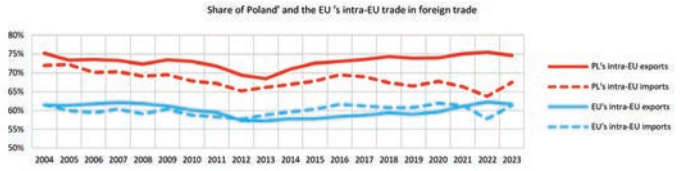
ADAM A. AMBROZIAK

Twenty one years of Polish EU membership: Deeper integration through trade in goods

Expert article • 3830

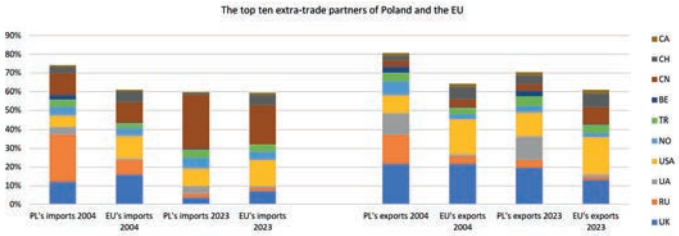
According to international economic theory, trade is the basis for economic cooperation and integration based on mutual understanding and trust, and the certainty of compliance with international trade rules makes it possible to build stable economic and political partnerships. Twenty one years after Poland's accession to the EU, it is worth verifying this theory in Poland's international trade development, in particular within the European Union (EU). The process of Poland's integration into European structures began much earlier, and dates back at least to the entry into force of the trade provisions of the Europe Agreement in the early 1990s. Thanks to the removal of traditional barriers to mutual access to both markets - the Polish market and the then-created European Single Market (ESM) - a free trade area for industrial goods was established before Poland's formal accession to the EU, and a partial and selective liberalisation of trade in agri-food products took place. However, it was not until Poland joined the EU market that the development of trade and deeper economic integration with European structures became a key factor.

From the moment it joined the EU, Poland had strong trade relations with the other Member States - in 2004, their share in Poland's total exports was 75.2% and in imports 72%, while for the EU it was 61.5% each. After a period of decline in 2012-2013, the concentration of Polish sales on the EU market returned to the level of 20 years before in 2023, although in the case of imports it reached a slightly lower level - around 68%. Taking into account that the average share of intra-EU trade remained at just over 60%, this means that the level of Poland's integration into the EU through trade in goods has definitely increased (the decline in the importance of EU imports in Poland's trade was mainly due to two reasons: exchange rate fluctuations and changes in the position of the main non-EU partners - China and the US).



Within the EU, Germany, the Czech Republic, France, Italy and the Netherlands remained the main recipients of Polish goods, although the order changed. The same was true for imports, although in this case Belgium replaced France. This means that Poland's intra-EU trade was concentrated not only with partners from the region, but mainly with the largest European economies.

As for trade with non-EU countries, when Poland joined the EU 21 years ago, the main recipients were the United Kingdom (then still within the Union), Russia, Ukraine, the United States and Norway. However, the list changed dramatically: the importance of Russia and Norway decreased in favour of Turkey and Switzerland in 2023. The geographical structure of Poland's extra-EU imports was slightly different: in the year of accession, Russia, the United Kingdom, China, the United States and Norway were the main suppliers. In recent years, in line with the global trend, China has clearly dominated Poland's imports, the US has a significant position and, due to the energy embargo, Russia's place has been taken by Norway, followed by Turkey and Ukraine. The above list, with slight differences in the positions of Switzerland and Ukraine, is consistent with the geographical structure of extra-EU trade, indicating Poland's effective integration into the system of contractual trade agreements concluded by the EU with third countries.



As regards the product structure of Polish exports to both the EU and non-EU markets, there was an increase in the share of food products at the expense of manufactured goods. In the case of the former, however, it is worth noting the significant increase in the share of processed food at the expense of primary agricultural products, which indicates the development of this industry in Poland. The same is true for industrial products - there was a significant increase in the share of exports (including sales to the EU market) of more advanced products, including advanced components for finished goods (automotive parts, electrical machinery and precision instruments), offered by larger EU countries (Germany, France and Italy), as well as the United Kingdom and Switzerland.

From the Polish point of view, the trade balance with the rest of the EU was positive in the first year after accession and continued to improve. This is an indication of the successful integration of the Polish economy into the European single market due to its relatively high competitiveness, not only in terms of price, which was important immediately after accession, but now also in terms of quality and technology. In addition, the surplus in intra-EU trade covered the deficit in trade with non-EU countries, which was mainly generated by imports from China and, in 2022, increased imports of energy raw materials from around the world.

The above statistics on Poland's trade within the European Single Market and with non-EU countries allow us to formulate a number of key conclusions from the point of view of Poland's integration into the EU:

- First, the example of Poland clearly shows that the optimal solution a successful integration process is the development of mutual trade. The gradual liberalisation of trade between Poland and the European Communities even before accession to the EU and the subsequent full integration into the mechanisms of the European Single Market ensured a significant increase in trade and, consequently, the intensification of increasingly advanced economic relations. This was evident in both the agri-food and industrial sectors.

- Secondly, the presence in such an advanced project as the European Single Market makes it possible to offset the potential negative effects of restricted access to third-country markets (embargoes in Russia, war in Ukraine, US trade wars). In the case of trade barriers, trade relocation traditionally leads to an increase in the importance of trade with partners within the integration grouping, making sales and supply of products (components and finished goods) more secure.

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TSVETA PETROVA

Poland's lost decade in Europe

Expert article • 3831

Warsaw's Missed Opportunity: Domestic politics and Russia's wars reduced Poland's role in Europe to a frontline bulwark—strategically vital, yet politically marginal.

A country's endowment can make it indispensable without making it an international leader. Over the past two decades, Poland's position on NATO's eastern flank guaranteed strategic relevance but not the authority to set Europe's agenda. A decade ago, Warsaw had a real chance to become a regional leader—anchoring the post-communist regional bloc and shaping EU policy toward the east. Instead, a mix of Russian aggression and Poland's own political ruptures left it as NATO's buffer: essential to deterrence and logistics, yet too often excluded from the rooms where strategy is written. This article explains how that gap between importance and leadership opened—and why it has proved so hard to close.

In the early 2000s, Poland was emerging as a leader of the Central and Eastern European countries. As the biggest of the post-communist entrants to the EU, its economy was growing and its political class was confident. Poland cast itself as the east's spokesman and the bridge between Brussels and the Eastern Neighborhood. Ukraine was its chosen cause—not just neighborly solidarity but a strategy to contain Russia.

During the Orange Revolution in 2004, President Aleksander Kwaśniewski personally mediated in Kyiv, helping Ukraine move forward in a decidedly democratic direction. That episode established Poland's credentials as both principled and effective in the region.

Poland then moved to agenda-setting. With Sweden, it co-designed the Eastern Partnership (2009), embedding its eastern vision inside EU institutions and processes and making Ukraine's Association Agreement the centerpiece. This was the high-water mark of Warsaw's influence.

After Russia seized Crimea in 2014, however, high-level crisis diplomacy flowed through the Normandy Format—Germany, France, Ukraine, and Russia—with Poland conspicuously absent. Warsaw had warned correctly about Moscow, but it was no longer at the table.

Domestic politics compounded the damage. The Law and Justice (PiS) government from 2015 plunged Poland into grinding disputes with EU institutions over the rule of law. Poland stayed hawkish on Russia and supportive of Ukraine, but it lost the credibility needed to build coalitions inside the Union.

The full-scale Russian invasion in 2022 briefly restored Poland's centrality. Geography made it indispensable: the main corridor for allied military assistance (not least via Rzeszów–Jasionka), a refuge for large numbers of Ukrainians, and the host to a permanent U.S. forward headquarters. All of that mattered—but it did not translate into agenda control in Brussels. Frictions with Kyiv over grain imports and over interwar historical disputes exposed the limits of Warsaw's leadership: indispensability in logistics has not equaled political authority.

The return of Donald Tusk as prime minister in December 2023 appeared to offer a way back. He repaired ties with the EU and put security—and Ukraine's EU accession—at the center of Poland's 2025 EU Council Presidency. Defense outlays surged above 4% of GDP, among NATO's highest. For a moment, Poland seemed ready to marry strategic weight and political legitimacy.

Then came another domestic reversal. In June 2025, Karol Nawrocki—a nationalist aligned with PiS—won the presidency, promising vetoes and confrontation with Brussels on core questions. Cohabitation returned, reform stalled, and Warsaw again found itself symbolically sidelined in Western councils.

The missed opportunity is clearer in regional perspective. Hungary isolated itself by aligning with Moscow; Romania became a steady Black Sea pillar without seeking continental leadership; the Baltics are moral leaders but too small to move EU strategy on their own. Only Poland had the scale to shift Europe's center of gravity eastward—and squandered it through domestic rupture and frayed EU trust.

Looking ahead, Russia's renewed focus on the Baltic–Nordic–Arctic axis underlines Poland's paradox. As Moscow builds out the Northern Sea Route and maintains pressure from Kaliningrad, Poland is the keystone of NATO's northern defense. The Suwałki Gap remains the alliance's choke point. Yet with Finland (2023) and Sweden (2024) joining NATO, the political center of northern security is drifting toward Helsinki and Stockholm, where maritime and Arctic expertise reside. Poland again risks remaining the bulwark rather than the architect.

As the main corridor to Ukraine and the hinge near Kaliningrad and the Suwałki Gap, Warsaw remains central to Europe's security. But credibility frayed in Brussels, divided government at home, and a northern security agenda increasingly shaped in Helsinki and Stockholm keep Poland near the action without consistently directing it. How much voice Poland has will track domestic cohesion and its capacity to work with—not against—the EU's core. Poland thus seems to be at a crossroads, with three possible paths ahead.

1. **Consolidation:** domestic détente and steady rule-of-law repairs let Warsaw lock into a Nordic-Baltic compact, channel defense spending into EU programs, and shape Ukraine's accession—Poland regains voice, not just utility.
2. **Muddle-through:** cohabitation drags on; Warsaw remains the indispensable conduit to Ukraine and the Suwałki Gap, but credibility wobbles and leadership is episodic, shared with Berlin, Paris, Helsinki, and Stockholm.
3. **Slippage:** nationalist retrenchment and renewed Brussels conflict shrink Poland's say; memory, grain, and transit spats with Kyiv fester; Russia exploits the seams with hybrid pressure, leaving Warsaw protected by NATO but sidelined in EU strategy. Which scenario prevails will be decided by whether Poland can turn competence at the front line into steadiness at home and patience in coalition.

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Polish-German relations

Expert article • 3832

1 Germany holds a central place in Polish foreign policy: due to its potential, political and historical conditions as well as direct neighborhood. In the current conditions - Russia's aggression against Ukraine, the war in Ukraine and Putin's clear intentions aimed at destabilizing the European Union and the European security system - the importance of Polish-German cooperation is determined by six overlapping circles of cooperation:

1. based on the Weimar Triangle and aimed at strengthening EU cohesion, especially in the field of Common Security and Defense Policy - until the establishment of the European Defense Union;
2. in strengthening the eastern flank on the border between Poland and Belarus;
3. in strengthening the eastern flank around the Kaliningrad Oblast and on the border of the Baltic states with Russia;
4. in ensuring security in the Baltic Sea basin;
5. in the Central European region,
6. the sixth common denominator for all above mentioned is to provide comprehensive assistance to Ukraine in the fight against the Russian aggressor.

2. The foundations for solid cooperation in the above-mentioned areas are good. Political changes in Poland after 1989, German reunification in 1990 and the related overcoming of the so-called Yalta order - led to the convergence of the fundamental foreign policy goals of both countries. Many bilateral problems have been closed, and Poland's membership in the EU and NATO has created a new framework for the future of Polish-German relations.

3. The foreign policy of the PiS ("Law and Justice" party) government (2015-2023) squandered these opportunities. At that time, the political state of Polish-German relations was frozen. PiS pursued a mindless, aggressive and offensive anti-German narrative that was intended to consolidate its electorate. It did not care about the repercussions of such a narrative in foreign policy. This was accompanied by a policy that was openly anti-EU and focused its security policy on bilateral guarantees from the US, at the expense of NATO's position. A certain internal political consensus in Poland was achieved in the field of security policy after Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

4. A coalition of democratic parties took over the government after PiS (following the elections on October 15, 2023) in very difficult conditions. The country was destabilized as a result of unlawful actions. In addition, the "legacy" in foreign policy was the decline of Poland's importance in the international environment, conflict with its neighbors, marginalization in the European Union, very bad relations with Germany.

5. Nevertheless, the takeover of power in Poland by democratic parties led to Poland regaining a strong position in the international environment. First of all, the very assumption of power by these parties contributed to "renewing" Poland's credibility. The personal arrangement is also favorable: Donald Tusk (Prime Minister) has an undisputed position as a politician with a European dimension, and Radosław Sikorski (Minister of Foreign Affairs) has begun to pursue a clear and effective foreign policy (inscribed within the framework of the EU, NATO and balanced in relation to the USA).

6. The changes on the German side (*Zeitwende* policy) and on the Polish side (democratic parties taking over the government at the end of 2023) led to great expectations for an end of the impasse in Polish-German relations. However, the results were (at the end of Chancellor Scholz's term) rather modest. New perspectives appeared after Chancellor Merz took power this spring, which was reflected in clear actions to increase military spending, intensify cooperation to strengthen the eastern flank and help Ukraine.

7. Nevertheless, the perspective of Polish-German relations is not clear. In Poland, the actions of the coalition of democratic parties were inhibited by the then president of the country (Andrzej Duda), who was affiliated with PiS. Contrary to expectations, the presidential elections in the summer of 2025 were won by a representative of the radical right (Karol Nawrocki) supported by PiS, with an anti-EU attitude, restrained towards Ukraine and focused on cooperation with Trump. In addition, the result of the presidential elections weakened the position of the coalition of democratic parties, so the result of the parliamentary elections in 2027 is unclear.

8. In the current situation, the direction of foreign policy aimed at good relations with Germany, pro-EU and pro-NATO (with balanced relations with Trump) will be continued, with certain limitations resulting from the position of the President. The year 2027 may bring a change if the elections are won by right-wing parties, led by PiS. Then - with a President and a government with the same political orientation - there could be a radical return to the anti-German, anti-EU narrative, undermining the importance of NATO and focusing on cooperation with Trump.

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KATARZYNA BARCIKOWSKA

Region first – *rationale* behind regional cooperation

Expert article • 3833

The Polish Presidency in the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region (1.07.2024-30.06.2025) and the following Presidency in the Council of the Baltic Sea States (which began on 1 July 2025) came at time of a disruptive, far-reaching geopolitical changes for the Baltic Sea region.

Russia's unprovoked and unjustified military aggression against Ukraine has profoundly impacted regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea region, prompting a significant re-evaluation of the EU and regional strategic priorities and goals. The evolving security landscape underscores the importance of building long-term resilience through a holistic, society-wide approach, in order to enhance regional stability and adaptability. Increased hybrid and disinformation activities, targeted in particularly acute way the Baltic Sea region, require a comprehensive response that goes beyond the traditional understanding of security.

Contemporary threats are often aimed at undermining mutual trust and understanding, also in the regional dimension. Both the EUSBSR and the CBSS have contributed over the years to creating strong regional bonds and effective networks. This is exactly what allows us today to face unexpected challenges with a sense of community. The remarkable intensification of dialogue among Baltic Sea countries, convergent approach on security and development of the region, provides excellent basis for intensified bilateral and regional cooperation. We are forming a like-minded group, especially in key foreign policy issues after the Russian aggression.

Support to Ukraine become a solid cement for our regional cooperation. Strengthening cooperation between the Baltic Sea countries and Ukraine is one of the crucial components of this effort and should be further developed within the EUSBSR as well as the CBSS. We can see the increased interest among Baltic Sea organizations in expanding their cooperation with Ukrainian entities, based on mutual benefits. It is also a useful tool of gaining experience the Ukrainian road to European integration. One of the most successful examples of such cooperation is the Baltic Sea Region Cultural Pearls project – cooperation between the region's and Ukrainian municipalities.

The Polish EUSBSR Presidency remained committed to ensuring efficient implementation of the three overall objectives of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region: Save the Sea, Connect the Region and Increase Prosperity. We especially focused on ensuring the smooth update of the EUSBSR Action Plan to tailor the document to current challenges. Our years' work brought a lot of foods for thought and showed a need for non-schematic solutions and activities, also in in the crucial sphere of including youth perspective into our everyday work.

The Polish CBSS Presidency continue the practical cooperation undertaken and built on achievements of the previous presidencies, in line with the CBSS long-term priorities: Safe and Secure Region, Sustainable and Prosperous Region and Regional Identity. We have took the challenge to proceed with the reflection process on main findings and recommendations presented by the High-level Wise Persons nominated in accordance with the Porvoo Declaration of 14th June 2024. Their report adequately reflected the need to significantly reform and refocus the CBSS in order to effectively meet the challenges of the new security environment.

Poland highly values the cooperation within the CBSS, as well as in the framework of four CBSS working groups. During the Polish Presidency in our everyday work we are focusing on activities related to strengthening preparedness and resilience building in the Baltic Sea region, with the aim to develop a strong common societal security culture. The priority is given inter alia to development of local and regional task forces as part of the anti-trafficking system (with a special focus on minors) and preventing forced labour. We are also continuing the work of the previous presidencies in the area of green shipping corridors.

As a parallel process, we launched the discussion aimed to strengthen the political pillar of the organization towards a more focused approach on regional security. Given the fact, that all the CBSS countries are now the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation members, it appears natural to use the CBSS as a useful space for discussing pressing security issues in the region, complementary to NATO and its structures, also on ad-hoc basis. That is why the Polish Presidency proposes to use the CBSS structures to contribute to a better coordination in such areas as protection of critical infrastructure in the Baltic Sea region as well as countering the shadow fleet.

The Baltic Sea serves as a gateway to the global market. It also remains a vital component of many countries' energy security. This is why unhindered passage of ships, respect for international law, and compliance with international norms by those accessing the Baltic Sea are crucial. At the same time, the Baltic Sea is emerging as a hub for offshore energy production, with several projects already under construction. These offshore energy initiatives - along with projects for offshore carbon capture and storage - also contribute to the region's energy transition. In this context, we must not forget that the Baltic is a natural reservoir requiring protection, with its environment and biodiversity demanding our constant attention and care.

The specific nature of the Baltic Sea requires a specific approach, discussed and worked out first among countries of the region – neighbours and closest allies. The Council of the Baltic Sea States, bringing together all of them, seem to be the most relevant tool here. We should not hesitate to use it.

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CORDELIA BUCHANAN PONCZEK

Poland: A Critical Partner on the Baltic Sea

Expert article • 3834

Poland enjoys around 530 kilometers of Baltic Sea coastline. The body of water is a source of economic security, in the form of commerce and trade, energy and electricity, facilitated through old and new investments in critical infrastructure, and industry, through shipyards and ports. But the Baltic Sea is also a source of security concern for Poland.

Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine has had profound implications for Poland's security role and its relationship to other countries in the Baltic Sea region. From worries of sabotage, like GPS jamming and vessel conflicts associated with the "dark" or "shadow" fleet, to the threats of open kinetic conflict, Poland must be ready, along with other NATO allies on the Baltic Sea, to meet Russian actions. The rise of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)—drones—and underwater, drones, too, pose new threats and risks for Poland to handle in concert with European and NATO allies.

Poland understands that its security comes from partnerships as well as investment in its own defense. At the beginning of September 2025, the newly elected Polish President Karol Nawrocki was in Washington, D.C., to meet with Trump and lobby that US troop presence not be withdrawn; the trip appears to have been worthwhile. President Nawrocki also paid a visit to Finland in September 2025 to meet with President Alexander Stubb and discuss the countries' common interests and the shared position on the eastern flank of NATO. Indeed, since 2023, Poland has been among the most visited countries by the Finnish parliamentary committees, ahead of Germany. Meanwhile, Polish Prime Minister Tusk was in Paris to meet with other leaders of the "coalition of the willing"—the group of European-NATO countries that are interested in providing security guarantees to Ukraine in lieu of the United States and stepping up Europe's defense. While there are strong divisions between Nawrocki, of the Law and Justice Party ("Prawo i Sprawiedliwość"—PiS) and Tusk, head of the Civic Coalition ("Koalicja Obywatelska"—KO), the two personalities and political parties are united in the common cause of Poland's security.

Indeed, Poland continues to be on track to be among NATO's significant military powers. Since 2015, its military spending has increased dramatically. The preceding PO-led government set aside €33.6 billion for its 10-year military modernization plan. In 2022, then-President Andrzej Duda (PiS) aimed to increase Polish military spending to 3% of GDP by next year and double the number of troops in the Polish Armed Forces up to 300,000 soldiers. Poland managed to reach this goal and decided to aim even higher. In 2024, Poland had a new record, with defense spending accounting for around 4.1% of GDP. Such high spending put Poland in a good position vis-à-vis other NATO members during the recent NATO summit, when US President Trump suggested that members pay 5% of GDP.

Poland's spending has for the most part gone towards major equipment purchases. The country has enhanced its efforts towards its military and defense modernization projects, including investments in new fighter aircraft and attack helicopters. The creation of the East Shield ("Tarcza Wschód") has been a critical component, especially as the Baltic States have proposed their Baltic Defense Line, to form a long barrier along NATO's eastern border with Russia and Belarus. In January, NATO announced the Baltic Sentry surveillance to prevent further sabotage, and in May, the countries agreed to an MOU for further surveillance and protection of undersea infrastructure. While these are steps in the right direction, Poland, as the other Baltic Sea NATO countries, need to continue to be one step ahead, and proactive, rather than reactive, to Russia's ploys. Indeed, Russia could exploit gaps in Baltic Sea security cooperation if they go unaddressed.

Poland has taken on several initiatives to enhance its maritime readiness and regional cooperation in the Baltic Sea. In late 2024, Prime Minister Tusk proposed joint naval patrols with the Baltic and Nordic countries. That aim was to complement NATO's air patrols by sharing surveillance, collaborating to monitor and secure maritime zones, responding to threats, and ensuring the security of critical infrastructure. In October 2024, a new naval headquarters, the Commander Task Force Baltic (CTF Baltic), was established in Rostock, Germany. CTF Baltic is currently headed by a German admiral, and it will have rotating staff positions, including Polish naval officers from the Maritime Operations Centre and a deputy commander position, held by Rear-Admiral Piotr Nieć. Poland is slated to take on command duties in 2028. Over the next years, Poland will work to establish POLMARFOR, in the Baltic Sea coastal city Gdynia, which will give support to the rotational command position. Though much of Poland's military investments have been focused on land forces, its modernization initiative is working to rectify this. Through its Orka program, Poland is in the process of replacing its 1980s Kilo-class submarines with new diesel-electric submarines (SSKs) to improve security in the Baltic Sea; competing bids are from Hanwha (South Korea), Saab (Sweden), and Fincantieri (Italy). Its Ratownik vessel, a submarine rescue and support vessel, is scheduled for delivery in 2029. Finally, Poland is working to upgrade its existing naval vessels, such as Mine Countermeasures Vessels (MCMVs), through its Kormoran II-class. Still, the country comes up short on maritime forces and coastal artillery and could consider taking steps to rectify this.

Poland sees the Baltic Sea as a single operation theater, and there are many places it can cooperate with other Baltic Sea NATO countries to divide responsibilities. Yet such cooperation between allies on the Baltic Sea requires greater intentionality and practice—not just rhetoric—among partners. This is more pertinent than ever. In September 2025, Poland faced a significant escalation and probing from Russia after a significant incursion by UAVs. Poland made the decision to send up NATO aircraft and shoot the drones down. Russia's overstepping of Polish and NATO lines is a steady way to erode deterrence. Though Russia claimed the drones had merely lost their way, one made it as far as Olesno, near Elbląg, only a short distance from the Gulf of Gdańsk. To respond to the threat, Poland relied on Polish, Dutch, German, Italian, and NATO assets. Such response through partnership underscores the importance of acting together to defend NATO territory. It is something that Poland must continue to emphasize in its approach to Baltic Sea security.

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MARTA GRZECHNIK

Poland's Baltic identity

Expert article • 3835

'Lecz miła Polska na żyznym zagonie
Zasiadła, jako u Boga na łonie;
Może nie wiedzieć Polak co to morze,
Gdy pilnie orze.'

[But dear Poland sits on a fertile field
As in God's bosom;
A Pole does not have to know the sea,
If he is a diligent ploughman.]

Sebastian Fabian Klonowic,
Flis: to jest spuszczanie statków Wisłą i inszymi rzekami do niej przypadającymi, 1595

This verse from the sixteenth-century poet Sebastian Fabian Klonowic is often quoted when Poland's historical relationship to the sea is discussed. It illustrates the complexity of this relationship and the difficulty of getting over the historical heritage in the modern-day context. Sitting on the fertile fields of the European Plain, diligently ploughing them to grow grain that fed big parts of Europe, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was content to leave sailing and overseas trade to others. The interests of the dominant class of noble landowners were tied to agriculture and southeastern expansion, and Poland's political traditions, its culture and what could be called the national character developed far from the shores of the Baltic Sea, separated from the seaside region of Pomerania by a natural barrier of marshes and dense woodlands. In this spirit, Renaissance and Baroque poets and philosophers celebrated the peaceful, pastoral life of the countryside over the perils of going to sea, valuing the grain from the Polish-Lithuanian fields more highly than treasures brought from overseas.

These factors were reinforced by the events and processes of more recent, nineteenth- and twentieth-century history, during which both the most vital interests and the most serious threats to the country's fate were bound to its position in Eastern or East Central Europe, between Russia/USSR and Germany, rather than to the Baltic shores. Thus, Poles grew to define themselves in these geopolitical contexts, through the experiences of being the victim of aggression and oppression from their eastern and western neighbours, Second World War occupation, incorporation into the communist block during the Cold War, and in more positive terms – as part of the Visegrád Group, of NATO's and EU's eastward expansion. Poland's identity revolves around an east-west axis, and on their mental maps Poles tend to situate themselves in this context.

This is not to say that there is no place for the Baltic Sea on these mental maps at all. The problematic German neighbourhood, for example, had in the nineteenth and especially twentieth century the dimension of competition for access to the Baltic Sea. A school of thought developed in this time identified neglecting this competition as a major factor that had contributed to the Commonwealth's downfall. The independence gained in 1918 came with access to the Baltic Sea, though disappointingly limited, lacking major ports, and carved out of German territory. This being adamantly contested by Germany throughout the interwar period, the anti-German dimension of Poland's stance on access to the Baltic Sea became even stronger. The main impulse for developing a maritime policy was the Polish-German customs war of 1925, which demonstrated vividly the importance of secure and free from foreign influence access to export markets through the maritime border.

However, this negative, anti-German dimension was not the only basis on which Poland's connection to the Baltic Sea was built. Major investments on the Baltic shore, especially the construction of the port in Gdynia (started in 1923), were accompanied by intensive maritime propaganda aiming to incorporate the maritime component into thinking about the national policies, economy, culture and identity. It was also meant to integrate the seaside region, Pomerania, with the rest of the Polish state, as – due to historic reasons mentioned above – it was not generally perceived as part of its core in the public imagination. This propaganda was conducted by, for example, the Baltic Institute (a research institution established in 1926) with its numerous academic publications, the Maritime and River (since 1930 Colonial) League with its journals addressed to the general public, mass events like Holidays of the Sea, and excursions to the seaside, as well as conveyed in literature, film, visual arts, etc. Poles were supposed to think of access to the Baltic Sea, and the investments made on its shores as vital to the country. There was a psychological dimension too: maritimity was associated with modernisation, maritime culture with progress, innovation, entrepreneurship and patriotism. The maritime programme was thus a modernising programme for the country struggling with numerous economic, political and social issues.

This programme was not entirely realised, either in the interwar period or later, when Poland gained a much wider access to the sea, with three major ports in Gdańsk, Gdynia and Szczecin. Poles have remained a predominantly land nation with more interest in the eastern and western neighbourhoods than the maritime border. But, at the same time, the ways of thinking about the sea and the maritime constructed in the interwar period, for example the association with progress and openness, have taken root in the popular imagination. Poles have started to know and love the sea, while not abandoning the fertile fields. And in the current geopolitical situation, when the Baltic Sea has become both the space of new threats and increased cooperation within NATO after its recent expansion, it might move closer to the centre of Polish mental maps.

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MAGDA LESZCZYNA-RZUCIDŁO

New Perspectives from the Baltic: Regenerative Tourism in Poland

Expert article • 3836

The global tourism landscape is undergoing a profound transformation. As the impacts of climate change, over-tourism, and socio-economic inequalities become more evident, there is a growing international focus on sustainability and regeneration. This shift brings both challenges and opportunities—especially for countries like Poland, where tourism plays a vital role in shaping local economies and cultural identity. In the Baltic Sea region, where ecological sensitivity meets rich heritage and vibrant coastal life, regenerative tourism presents a compelling alternative to traditional growth-driven models.

For Poland, embracing regenerative tourism means more than aligning with EU policy frameworks—it marks a strategic step towards building long-term destination resilience, vitality, and inclusivity. While the European Union's Transition Pathway for Tourism and other green transition initiatives provide a solid foundation, true transformation happens on the ground—through the actions of local stakeholders, regional authorities, and national tourism organisations. In this context, regenerative tourism offers a forward-thinking approach, one that goes beyond minimising harm to actively enriching the places we visit and the lives of the communities who live there.

The Pomorskie Tourism Board (PROT), as one of the coordinators of the EU Strategy for the Baltic Sea Region's (EUSBSR) Policy Area Tourism – together with the Council of the Oulu Region in Finland – plays a central role in advancing this agenda. Their ongoing efforts to promote sustainable and inclusive tourism development across the macro-region are gaining visibility and impact. One of the key milestones in this process was the Baltic Sea Tourism Forum 2025, which took place in Gdańsk in October 2025. As the 17th edition of this flagship event, the Forum gathered policymakers, tourism professionals, academics, NGOs, and entrepreneurs to exchange ideas, showcase best practices, and co-create strategies for a more responsible and regenerative tourism sector across the Baltic Sea region.

At its core, regenerative tourism is about leaving a place better than we found it. This approach builds on sustainable tourism by placing equal emphasis on environmental restoration, social cohesion, and cultural continuity. In the Polish context, this could mean restoring coastal habitats, promoting off-season and nature-based tourism, involving communities in tourism planning, and supporting circular local economies where benefits remain in the region. It also means creating authentic experiences that revive local crafts, culinary traditions, and intangible heritage—offering visitors genuine ways to connect with both place and people.

Our strength lies in our ability to adapt global ideas to local realities. While Poland may not yet be seen as a pioneer in regenerative tourism, we are quick to learn—and our varied natural landscapes, from serene lake districts and ancient forests to lively seaside towns, provide ideal conditions for such development. We are open to learning from international experiences and eager to share local innovations within our tourism ecosystem. In fact, many Polish tourism actors are already working in ways that reflect regenerative principles, even if they don't yet call them that. Local entrepreneurs, cultural organisations, NGOs, and municipal leaders are often deeply committed to protecting nature, nurturing social bonds, and reinforcing community identity—all of which are at the heart of regenerative tourism.

The role of EUSBSR PA Tourism coordinators and the Pomorskie Tourism Board is particularly significant in consolidating these efforts and making them visible. By aligning regional and local tourism strategies with broader EU priorities, they help foster policy coherence, leverage funding opportunities, and support capacity-building across the Baltic Sea region. Their focus on integrated approaches that prioritise both environmental integrity and human well-being is helping to redefine what "successful tourism" means in the 21st century. This is not just about economic returns, but about creating a tourism model that adds value to communities and ecosystems alike. It is about shifting from extraction to contribution.

Poland's rich history, living traditions, and natural beauty offer an inspiring setting for regenerative tourism. From the dramatic coastline of Gdańsk and the forests of Kashubia to the historic towns of Warmia and Mazury, the region is ripe for immersive, slow-paced, and meaningful travel. These types of experiences not only deepen visitors' connection with destinations but also boost local pride, strengthen economies, and support environmental care.

Looking ahead, Poland's growing engagement with regenerative tourism—especially within the Baltic Sea region—offers a valuable chance to take a leadership role in this emerging field. By learning from international pioneers, encouraging cross-sector collaboration, and drawing on the creativity and commitment of local actors, Poland can help shape a truly future-proof tourism model. One that supports the well-being of people and the planet while celebrating the uniqueness of each place.

This regenerative path not only reflects the strategic priorities of the European Union but also aligns with the values and expectations of today's travellers, communities, and tourism professionals. It envisions a form of tourism that gives back more than it takes—and, in doing so, helps build a more resilient, inclusive, and inspiring Baltic Sea region.

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Sopot as a model of regional cooperation: Culture, heritage and integration in the Baltic Sea Basin

Expert article • 3837

The city of Sopot, picturesquely situated on the Baltic Sea, has been aspiring for years to build its position as a cultural and tourist centre in the Baltic Sea region. In recent years, we have been particularly intensively developing international cooperation with resorts in Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Finland, and Sweden. These efforts culminated in a series of events organised last year, which opened a new chapter in building a transnational dialogue about cultural heritage, architecture, and the future of seaside resorts.

A shared concern for the heritage of spa towns

One of the key events of 2024 was the international scientific conference entitled "Architecture of Baltic Sea Spas at the Turn of the 19th and 20th Centuries," jointly organised by the City of Sopot, the Sopot Museum, the City Conservator's Office, and the partner city of Heringsdorf. The meeting, held on October 9-10 at the State Art Gallery in Sopot, brought together researchers and experts from Poland, Germany, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, and Scandinavia. Conference participants focused on the region's shared architectural heritage and the challenges facing resorts with rich spa histories today.

The speakers at the conference included renowned researchers, and the lectures focused on topics such as the development of bathing resorts and urban planning in towns like Heringsdorf, Zinnowitz, Sopot, Pärnu, and Haapsalu. The conference served as a platform for exchanging knowledge and strengthening international cooperation. There was a recurrent emphasis on the need for joint efforts to protect this unique cultural landscape and to work towards achieving global recognition of its values.

Publishing and popularisation activities

The conference will lead to a post-conference publication, set to be released in late August or early September 2025. This bilingual publication, available in Polish and German, will include most of the papers presented at the conference. It will serve as a valuable resource for professionals, students, architects, and decision-makers engaged in heritage conservation. The publication is funded by the City of Sopot and its German partner.

The Sopot Museum, in collaboration with the city of Heringsdorf, has organized a joint outdoor exhibition that highlights the unique spa architecture of both towns. This exhibition is open to residents and tourists alike, with the goal of promoting this distinct heritage and raising awareness about the importance of preserving and enhancing historic spas in a contemporary context.

Towards UNESCO: a joint initiative of Baltic resorts

One of the most significant results of Sopot-German cooperation is the proposal to submit a joint application for the inclusion of the Baltic Sea region's spa architecture on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This initiative, initiated by the Heringsdorf authorities, has generated considerable interest from the City of Sopot, which has actively engaged in the process, collaborating with the National Heritage Institute and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

One of the most significant outcomes of the Sopot-Heringsdorf cooperation is the proposal to submit a joint application for the inclusion of the Baltic Sea region's spa architecture on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This initiative, launched by the Heringsdorf authorities, has generated considerable interest from the City of Sopot. The city has actively engaged in the process by collaborating with the National Institute of Cultural Heritage and the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage.

Study visits by representatives of both cities not only allowed for a better understanding of local conditions but also for the joint development of a strategy for the protection and promotion of spa heritage. Currently, efforts are being made to expand the group of signatories for the application, with plans to include other Baltic cities that are interested in collaborating in this area.

Baltic Horizons – sculpture as a language of climate dialogue

Another interesting element of Sopot's international cooperation was the Baltic Horizons initiative. We organised an international sculpture competition aimed at integrating artists and cultural institutions from the Baltic Sea region. Our goal was to highlight the challenges of today through art displayed in public spaces. Art served as a tool for dialogue, diagnosis, and future design. The selected sculptures from the competition were designed to blend into Sopot's urban environment while simultaneously raising environmental awareness among viewers. The competition jury included representatives from cultural institutions in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Finland. Baltic Horizons was not only an artistic project but also a social and educational initiative, illustrating how art can foster enduring international partnerships.

Sopot – a literary window to the Baltic Sea

Sopot's regional cooperation, therefore, has a strong cultural dimension. Another example of this was the 13th edition of the Sopot by the Book Literary Festival (2024). This year's theme focused on literature and culture from the Baltic Sea region. At the organisers' invitation, 16 authors from Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Finland, Sweden, and Denmark came to Sopot.

The festival, organised in collaboration with institutions such as the Swedish Art Council, Finnish Literature Exchange, Lithuanian Culture Institute, and Latvian Literature, has become a space for dialogue about the shared cultural values, diversity, and identity of the Baltic region. These activities demonstrate that culture, alongside material heritage, is an equally important pillar of regional cooperation.

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Sopot as a model of international cooperation

Sopot is steadily establishing itself as a key partner in regional cooperation within the Baltic Sea area. Through the active involvement of municipal institutions, museums, non-governmental organizations, and international partners, the city is exemplifying how to sustainably and innovatively blend tradition with modernity and history with the future.

These initiatives, from scientific conferences, through exhibition and publishing projects, to engaging cultural events, are part of a broader strategy for regional integration based on cultural values, heritage protection, and joint efforts for sustainable development. At a time when regional cooperation is becoming a key tool in building the resilience and identity of the European community, the activities in Sopot illustrate that even medium-sized cities can significantly influence the future of our region on both local and international levels.

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JAKUB M. GODZIMIRSKI

Is Poland's Turn to the North a strategic innovation?

Expert article • 3838

Poland's geographical location, history and institutional memberships are important factors influencing strategic policy choices. Since December 2023 the strategic decisions have been made by the government led by Donald Tusk formed after the victory in October 2023. The new coalition has been implementing policy that in many respects has been different from that of their predecessors. One of the innovations was more focus on relations with Poland's neighbours in the North.

However, due to the Russia's aggression against Ukraine the new coalition decided to continue the rearmament program launched by its predecessors. In 2025 Poland is to spend 4.7% of the country's GDP on defence related matters. By 2030 Poland is to have a well-equipped 300 000 strong army with 1000 modern tanks (Abrams, K2, Leopard, PT-91 Twardy), 1400 infantry fighting vehicles (Borsuk and others), more than 500 modern artillery systems (K9, Krab), more than 300 rocket artillery systems (HIMARS and K-239 Chunmo), 96 Apache helicopters, 32 F-35, 48 F-16 and 48 FA-50 aircraft and 8 air-defence Patriot batteries.

To address security related challenges the new government has decided to reverse some negative trends strengthening relations with France and Germany in the Weimar Triangle format. Poland has also been pursuing its security objectives in close cooperation with the EU partners by taking part in EU-led security related-projects such as Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO), European Defence Fund (EDF) or the Coordinated Annual Review on Defence (CARD). Poland's security cooperation with NATO allies is still the backbone of the Polish security policy. Poland today stands at the intersection of two strategic paths. It continues to treat NATO and the U.S. as central to its defence posture, but it no longer treats EU defence policy as symbolic or ir¬relevant.

However, in addition to this institutionalised dimension of the country's security policy with focus on NATO and EU cooperation, Poland has also embarked on strengthening various forms of regional security cooperation as a way of dealing with security problems. There are several reasons why regional security cooperation should be developed. First, it is of¬ten so that various types of security challenges countries encounter have a regional dimen¬sion. Second, regional cooperation on common regional challenges can be a solution to what could be termed 'consensus dilemma' in a situation when decisions in NATO with its 32 members and the EU with 27 members must be taken by all members with differing perceptions of security challenges. Third, regional security cooperation can also transcend institutional borders.

From the very beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine Poland decided to support Ukraine's fight against aggression by becoming a substantial provider of military hardware. Poland is also an important transit hub for supplies of weapons to Ukraine provided by other partners from the pro-Ukrainian coalition of willing. As a way of increasing the level of regional security cooperation Poland has also been active in the Bucharest nine format in which Poland works closely with other regional partners facing similar security challenges on NATO's and EU's eastern flank. Poland's cooperation with the three Baltic States – Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – is one of the most important regional forms of security cooperation as all four play a critical role in defending the Suwałki Gap, the narrow land corridor be¬tween Belarus and Kaliningrad that serves as NATO's only direct connection to the Baltic States. Finally, because of the recent NATO enlargement to Finland and Sweden that has turned the Baltic Sea into an area where enlarged NATO meets Russia, also Poland's security cooperation with the Nordic countries has intensified.

Poland's recent strategic turn to the North was clearly signalled by the fact that Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk decided on several occasions to join Nordic and Baltic partners in discussions on security related matters. This is sometimes viewed as a sort of strategic innovation, because Polish power elites have been traditionally most interested in dealing with strategic issues along the east-west axis. This strategic turn to the North can signal a shift in Polish strategic thinking and practice but can also be viewed as a natural development in a situation when all Nordic and Baltic neighbours have become NATO members and must deal jointly with what all of them perceive as a growing Russian threat. In that sense this strategic turn to the North can be viewed not as a rupture with the Polish traditional strategy, but rather as a natural move complementing Poland's engagements in other geographical, strategic and institutional settings.

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Regional formats in Poland's policy: the North Dimension

Expert article • 3839

The common perception of strategic interests that link Poland, the three Baltic states, and the Nordic countries is a new element in this part of Europe. This primarily results from Russia's aggression against Ukraine, which reshaped the regional security architecture. For Poland, the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO was vital for strengthening security in the Baltic Sea region. Moreover, the end of Russia's involvement in the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) and other institutions opened new opportunities.

In Poland's foreign policy, the importance of the North has significantly increased. Multilateral formats, including CBSS, are a key component of the northern policy. Traditionally, Poland's foreign policy has been oriented along an east-west axis. While the concepts of its Western and Eastern policies were well defined, the northern dimension lacked a coherent approach. After Poland joined NATO and the EU, thus achieving its long-term goals, new foreign policy goals were defined, still based on the east-west approach. For many years, from a Polish perspective, the Nordic states appeared somewhat remote. The national interests of both Poland and the Nordic states were largely focused elsewhere.

Russia's annexation of Crimea (2014), followed by a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, marked a turning point for the security environment. It also affected Poland's approach to regional cooperation. With the undisputed role of the EU and NATO, the activity of smaller regional forums increased in the face of new threats (including military threats, hybrid warfare, and energy security risks). Between 2015 and 2023, Poland's foreign policy, in terms of its northern dimension and regional cooperation, prioritised the CBSS, the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), and the Bucharest Nine (B9). After the parliamentary elections in 2023, the new government changed the approach to the 3SI and B9, emphasising that these were presidential-level projects. A challenging period of cohabitation began, as Poland's president and government came from opposing political backgrounds. However, the growing importance of the Baltic Sea region is not questioned.

The CBSS set up in 1992 at the initiative of Germany and Denmark, has developed through the decades and has its permanent secretariat in Stockholm. Poland took part in the CBSS from the beginning, in 2015-2016 held its third annual rotating presidency, and in June 2025 started the fourth presidency. Currently, Minister of Foreign Affairs, R. Sikorski, serves as the CBSS's main representative and spokesperson during the 2025–2026 term. He has highlighted that it is the only high-level political dialogue forum uniting all states of the Baltic region, excluding Russia. Security is the key focus of this presidency.

The 3SI was the first regional project originating in Central Europe with a strategic approach to the North. Proposed by the presidents of Poland A. Duda, and Croatia K. Grabar-Kitarović, the 3SI has focused on the development of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure on the north-south axis in the eastern part of the EU. At present, the 3SI comprises 13 of the 27 EU member states, including Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, but the 3SI Priority Interconnection Projects also involve other states, such as Germany, Finland, Sweden, and Norway. For example, Finland is a partner in 3SI projects such as the *Rail Baltica Projects* and *Posejdon (ORLEN Neptun) + HyFly2 (PKN ORLEN)*. The jubilee 10th 3SI, accompanied by the Business Forum, was organised in Warsaw in April 2025.

While the 3SI focuses on infrastructure development within the EU, **the B9** concentrates on military cooperation along NATO's eastern flank. Inaugurated in 2015, it includes nine of NATO's 29 member states, i.a. Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia. It also serves as a platform for cooperation with other partners. For example, Finland and Sweden took part in the B9 summit in Riga in 2024. In 2025, the B9 and Nordic Countries Summit B9 summit was organised in Vilnius, attended by the NATO Secretary General.

Deep political polarisation in Poland has influenced some aspects of foreign policy, including regional cooperation. However, there is a broad consensus regarding the growing strategic importance of the North. In his April 2025 annual address, Minister of Foreign Affairs R. Sikorski underscored the significance of the Baltic Sea region and referenced Poland's CBSS presidency. Notably, he did not mention the 3SI or B9, signalling a shift in narrative. These formats are developing, but as part of the presidential agenda. Regardless of internal political dynamics, the Baltic Sea region has become a strategic priority for Poland. The concept of the North policy is still taking shape, with regional cooperation being a key element of that approach.

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Polish-Nordic partnership: shared sea, shared path

Expert article • 3840

In recent years, a series of developments has drawn Poland and the Nordic countries closer, once again proving the yet undiscovered layers of potential in the Baltic Sea Region. The most significant were: the launch of the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline in 2022; joint ventures of Danish and Norwegian companies with Polish entities in offshore wind investments; the agreement on a strategic partnership between Poland and Sweden signed in November 2024. And, of course, Finland and Sweden joining NATO, which further strengthened defence cooperation in the Baltic Sea region. Shift of Poland towards the North was recently noted in an article in *The Economist,* which claimed that Poland is becoming less Central European and more Baltic.

In the economic dimension, we see that successful Polish-Nordic cooperation can make a significant contribution to the competitiveness of the European economy on the global stage - a major challenge the European community is facing. Within the Baltic Sea region, Poland plays a special role, linking the Nordics and the Baltics to Western Europe by land and facilitating North–South and East–West trade flows. Planned infrastructure projects such as Rail Baltica, Via Carpathia, the Nordic-Baltic Hydrogen Corridor and the expansion of Polish seaports can even enhance cooperation within the region.

In difficult times, European countries respond to challenges by strengthening regional alliances. In the case of Polish-Nordic relations, there is already much to build on.

Last year marked the 20th anniversary of Poland's accession to the European Union. For SPCC, it was a good occasion to take a closer look at the development of economic ties between Poland and the Nordic countries. Two decades after Poland joined the EU, the Nordic countries have become the third-largest foreign investors in Poland. The total value of capital invested has reached €15 billion, while Nordic companies present in Poland directly account for around 1.3% of Poland's GDP. More importantly, Nordic companies see their presence in Poland as long term. The reinvestment rate of profits by Scandinavian investors is 70% - ten percentage points higher than the average for all foreign investors. For Swedish investors, the reinvestment rate is even higher, reaching 92%.

Bilateral trade relations have also developed rapidly. The Nordic countries are currently Poland's second-largest trading partner, with total trade turnover in goods and services reaching €56.4 billion in 2023. A growing segment of the Polish economy is engaged in developing supply chains connected to Nordic businesses and exports to the Nordics. The total value of production in Poland for Scandinavian recipients - whether by direct exporters or their suppliers - amounts to approximately PLN 75 billion, or 2.5% of Poland's GDP. About 350,000 employees are involved in the entire supply chain. This is more than twice the value generated directly in Poland by Scandinavian companies, which themselves employ around 200,000 people, making them the fourth-largest group of foreign employers in the country.

Over the past 20 years, trade turnover between Poland and the Nordics has increased more than sixfold. More important, however, is the transformation in the structure of this trade. In the early 2000s, Poland's main exports to the Nordic countries were raw materials, clothing, and repaired ships. Since then, exports of electronic devices, pharmaceutical products, furniture, and vehicles have grown significantly. Today, Nordic-Polish business relations are marked by increasing technological sophistication.

Such change would not have been possible without the transfer of knowledge and know-how that takes place through business and economic cooperation: employee training, the creation of new technologies, knowledge-sharing among partners and clients, and the introduction of new solutions to the market. The transfer goes both ways. Nordic businesses value Poland's economic transformation towards digital technologies, which has resulted in strong technological preparedness, openness, and solid online competencies among local companies that are eager to invest in innovation.

Looking more closely, each Nordic country is, of course, unique in terms of its economic relations with Poland. But when we turn to the future one thing remains constant: there are many areas where Poland and the Nordic countries can successfully cooperate. Partnerships for the green transition and energy security, defence, digitalization and logistics are just a few examples that link economies and societies across the Baltic Sea.

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Poland's Baltic and Nordic Policy – The Direction for North

Expert article • 3841

The Direction for North

The Baltic and Nordic direction of Polish foreign policy became currently Poland's Northern Policy. This play on words is not accidental, as it brings some linguistic issues. At the strategic level, the Northern Direction defines the spectrum of Poland's activities in the Baltic Sea Region (BSR), with a broader semantically meaning.

The North, as a phrase encompassing Poland's political activity, defines in practice a new/updated form of Poland's presence in the Baltic Sea region. This is manifested in Poland's effective cooperation with the Baltic and Nordic countries on the basis of shared priorities and interests. Therefore, cooperation in the NB8+ format has a broad common denominator – the security of the region, its integration and compatibility.

This perspective is perfectly illustrated by Poland's current priorities within the framework of its presidency of the Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) – since the 1990s, the most important format for political cooperation in the region. This is all the more so as the CBSS itself is currently in the momentum of its transformation and adaptation. This process alone shows the stage of reorganisation that the Northern Europe is undergoing.

Strategfic Northern Priorities

Since 2022 Poland is increasing its involvement in BSR through active and effective participation and/or leadership in regional initiatives. Poland, along with other countries in the region – the Nordic and Baltic states – is adding a new quality to regional formats and strengthening Northern Europe's visibility in NATO and EU.

Security: Poland unanimously supported **Sweden and Finland's membership in NATO**, which significantly changed the security architecture in the BSR, although Russia's presence remains a challenge (despite being excluded from most organizations in the region). Russia's increased activity in the Baltic Sea prompted Poland to propose, at the NB8 summit (which was not so obvious and frequently practiced before) in Swedish Harpsund, in November 2024, the creation of a joint naval policing mission of the Baltic and Nordic countries to protect infrastructure and maritime security in the Baltic Sea. The need for enhanced resilience, critical infrastructure protection, and countering hybrid threats is also consistently emphasized.

Together with the Baltic states, Poland is determined to **continue tightening EU's sanctions policy against Russia and Belarus.** From the outset, they have been adamant about abandoning Russian energy supplies as soon as possible (which the EU has announced for 2027).

Underlying these many actions is the key conviction of all Northern European countries that **Ukraine must be still supported**, especially after NATO's unprecedented action of shooting down Russian drones that violated Polish airspace in September 2025.

Energy and Supply: Energy independence and security of supply are crucial for the region, not only for households but also for strategic sectors of the economy. Joint efforts to electrify industry and achieve energy independence from Russia are essential to ensure Europe's long-term competitiveness.

All the more so, because according to estimates, 48% of the energy resources consumed in Poland are imported via the Baltic Sea, and this figure is expected to rise to 61% over the next fifteen years. As a result, energy infrastructure (gas and oil ports, GIPL and BalticPipe connections) is becoming increasingly important. Even more, with offshore in the Baltic Sea (only Polish company PGE plans to build two offshore wind farms with a total capacity of up to 2.5 GW by 2030). Moreover, seaports became game changer for the entire region due to changes in transport routes. They currently provide approximately 10% of the Polish state budget's revenue from VAT, customs duties, and excise taxes.

The potential for economic cooperation should also be exploited and supply chains to be secured. The contribution of Nordic companies to the development of the Polish economy amounts to €15 billion in investments, €56.4 billion in mutual trade, over 200,000 jobs, and 1.3% of Poland's GDP generated directly by Scandinavian companies operating in Poland.

Innovation and Environment: The development of **new technologies** is important for an efficient energy transition and ecological resource management in the BSR. This makes the protection of the Baltic Sea's biodiversity and the prevention of ecological disasters (e.g., caused by the so-called shadow fleet) all the more indisputable. When Poland and Norway are developing joint initiatives in the field of carbon capture and storage (CCS), which is an important element of both countries' decarbonization strategies, Poland together with B3 try to build the Baltic AI GigaFactory. This for digital sovereignty and the competitiveness of the European AI market with the US and China.

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Poland–Finland: Beyond Tradition

Expert article • 3842

New areas of economic cooperation between Poland and Finland

Although geographically separated by the Baltic Sea, Poland and Finland have been developing dynamic economic relations for many years. Their foundation is EU membership, shared democratic values, and the growing importance of the Baltic Sea region as a space of intensive trade, technological, and energy exchange. Polish-Finnish cooperation fits into the broader context of Nordic-Baltic integration, where Poland becomes a natural partner for Finland due to its market size, logistical location, and industrial potential.

Trade and Investments

Trade turnover between Poland and Finland remains at a high level, reaching several billion euros annually. Poland is one of Finland's most important export partners in Central and Eastern Europe, while Finland remains an attractive destination for Polish exports, particularly in the agri-food, furniture, and chemical sectors. In turn, Finland supplies Poland mainly with machinery, industrial equipment, electronics, and technological solutions.

Finland is also an important investor in Poland – the presence of Finnish companies in the wood, metal, energy, and telecommunications sectors has contributed to technology transfer and the implementation of high-quality standards. At the same time, more and more Polish companies are looking for niches in the Finnish market, especially in the IT services, logistics, and innovative industrial solutions sectors.

Key Areas of Cooperation

1. Energy and green transition – Finland is one of Europe's leaders in renewable energy, particularly biomass and wind power. Poland is intensively developing its RES sector, seeking modern solutions and technological partners. Joint projects in green energy and the circular economy can become one of the pillars of the relationship.
2. Digitalization and new technologies – Finland is the country of Nokia and an education system that emphasizes innovation and digital competences. Poland has one of the largest pools of IT specialists in Europe. The synergy of these potentials may contribute to the creation of joint R&D projects and solutions in artificial intelligence, automation, and cybersecurity.
3. Agri-food sector – Podlasie and other Polish regions specialize in high-quality food production, which is well received in Nordic countries. Finland, focusing on healthy, ecological food, is an attractive export market and also a potential partner in the development of modern processing technologies.
4. Transport and logistics – Poland's geographical location makes it a key hub in transport corridors linking Scandinavia with the rest of Europe. The development of seaports, rail connections, and highways creates favorable conditions for increasing the flow of goods between Poland and Finland.

Defense and Civil Protection

A dynamically growing area of Polish-Finnish cooperation is the defense and civil protection sector. Due to its geopolitical position and long-standing neighborhood with Russia, Finland has been investing for decades in modern defense technologies and a well-developed system of shelters and civil protection. In 2023, Finland joined NATO, which further opened the space for deeper military cooperation with Poland, which has long actively supported the security of NATO's eastern flank.

Poland and Finland can build joint projects in such areas as:

- production and servicing of military equipment, including armored vehicles, electronic systems, and protective technologies,
- CBRN technologies (protection against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear threats), where Finland is one of the European leaders,
- shelter systems and civil defense infrastructure, which in Poland are only now gaining importance, while in Finland they have long been a standard in urban planning,
- cybersecurity and critical infrastructure protection, combining Poland's IT potential with Finland's experience in strategic security.

Including the defense sector in economic cooperation also has a political dimension – joint investments and knowledge transfer strengthen not only bilateral relations but also the security of the entire Baltic region. Particularly inspiring for Poland is Finland's shelter policy, which ensures that every citizen has access to a safe evacuation place. In the face of new hybrid and geopolitical threats, such a model can be a valuable guideline for Polish local and central authorities.

Perspectives and Challenges

The future of Polish-Finnish cooperation depends on several key factors. Firstly, it is necessary to further strengthen business dialogue – both through bilateral chambers of commerce and regional cooperation initiatives. Secondly, the challenge remains the alignment of regulations and quality standards, especially in the food and technology sectors. Finally, cultural and mental issues play an important role, influencing the way negotiations are conducted and long-term relationships are built.

In conclusion, Poland and Finland have enormous potential to develop economic cooperation based on complementary strengths. Finland offers innovation, advanced technologies, and high-quality standards, while Poland provides a large market, a dynamically growing industrial sector, and a strategic logistical location. Together, the two countries can strengthen their position in the Baltic region and the European Union, creating lasting partnerships based on mutual trust and pragmatism.

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ANTTI RAHIKKA

Why Poland matters?

Expert article • 3843

Background

It is all about perspective. I moved back to Northern Europe some 1.5 years ago from the Middle East after almost 18 years there. In many ways it felt like coming home; Poland to me is very similar to Finland – food, some parts of the culture and even the business. On the other hand, I hear from many Finns how Poland is very different with a complex bureaucracy and challenging ways of doing business. Naturally Poland is a different from Finland and Nordics, refreshingly proud rising power in the heart of the Europe.

Why Poland matters?

I am particularly interested in developing the commercial cooperation between our nations and in this context, Poland is often overlooked. Let me give some background: In the first half of 2025 (January to June) Poland was the 6th largest good's export destination for Finnish exporters (source: https://tilastot.tulli.fi/en/-/monthly-statistics-on-the-international-trade-in-goods-june-2025), Finnish companies employ tens of thousands of people in Poland and the trade is well balanced. Recently there were some examples of great cooperation in cutting edge technologies such as satellites and quantum computing: Iceye attracting investments from both Finnish and Polish governments via their investment vehicles but also significant orders from both countries to enhance European sovereignty.

Finns have traditionally traded with the neighbours. This was and still is natural since our economies with, especially, Sweden and Estonia are closely interlinked. Many of us still remember how Finland's trade with Soviet Union was very significant, rising to 20-25% of our total exports. Those days are gone and now our trade with Russia is very low for good reasons. Achieving major growth in those neighbouring markets is, for a variety of reasons, quite challenging. Next neighbours such as Poland and Germany require a bit more effort in crossing the Baltic Sea, but markets are entirely different in size compared to, for example Nordic and Baltic countries.

Poland's economic rise started in 1990s. In 1990s the starting level was very low, but the growth has been very rapid, in average 4,12% per year from 1992 to 2025 (projection for 2025). (source: IMF WEO 2025). In 2025 Poland is expected to climb to 20th place in the global GDP comparison and reaching "Trillion dollar club" as per Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. (Source: https://www.gov.pl/web/primeminister/poland-joins-the-trillionaires-club-a-historic-entry-into-the-worlds-top-20-economies).

Finnish exports to Poland have grown steadily during the 2000s but we have actually lost slightly our market share since the market growth has outpaced our efforts.

I want to highlight some specific areas in where we could seek for deeper cooperation and increase of the trade and prosperity.

Energy transition

Finland has succeeded, in my opinion, very well in achieving very green yet reliable and affordable energy. One weakness is relatively high volatility that is creating challenges especially for those electricity users who cannot time their energy use. However, in general energy in Finland is affordable.

In Poland the energy transition is still very much in the making, coal is still an important source of electricity. This, with for example on-going nuclear energy projects and ambitions is creating a long lasting and sizeable business opportunity.

Si vis pacem, para bellum

It is very unfortunate that our peace-loving nations need to spend a significant part of government budget on defence. In Poland the defence related spending is around 20% of the government budget in 2026 (around 5% of the GDP). This naturally is a huge figure in modern Europe and quite a burden for the state finances. The procurement and execution related to this need to be well balances and planned which I trust those are.

Finnish defence industry has a long track record of cooperation with Poland, most notably the Rosomak – program during past around 20 years. We aim to continue and widen this mutually beneficial cooperation that creates jobs, prosperity and security in both countries. In addition, the Finnish model of comprehensive security is very interesting in Poland and other CEE region countries. One important part of this is the civil security including the shelters.

All in all, the Baltic Sea region creates a natural region for very close cooperation in terms of trade, logistics and security as well as even closer cultural ties. This is increasingly important as the world is more unpredictable than ever.

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KAISA LEIWO & JARI RASTAS

Poland Provides Cooperation Opportunities for Companies in Southwest Finland

Expert article • 3844

From the perspective of Southwest Finland, Poland is an interesting and dynamic economic region located on the southern side of the Baltic Sea, within easy reach thanks to good transport connections. Poland is a significant trade partner for Finland, ranking among the top ten countries in both exports and imports. The country has announced its ambition to become one of Finland's top five foreign trade partners. Poland's new ambassador, Tomasz Chlon, has pledged to actively promote commercial relations between the two countries.

Wizz Air has operated flights from Turku to Gdańsk since 2008, and from there, connections to other parts of Poland are excellent. Travel between the regions is therefore easy and convenient - it is faster to reach Gdańsk from Turku than to reach Helsinki. A project to open a direct sea freight connection between Turku and Gdynia is also well underway.

Currently, an estimated 300 Finnish companies operate in the Polish market. Of these, just under a hundred have production in Poland, and in total, more than 200 companies have a physical presence in the country. The number is growing, and interest from both sides is active.

Poland's growing economy opens new opportunities for commercial cooperation with Southwest Finland. The GDP growth forecast of 3.4% is among the highest in the EU. Poland offers companies a central location within the EU internal market, flexible labor markets, and a well-educated workforce. Like other European countries, Poland aims to reduce its dependence on fossil fuels, which creates opportunities for Finnish companies leading the green transition. Business opportunities also exist in digitalization, industrial manufacturing, medical production and research, logistics, and the maritime sector – an area in which cooperation with Finland has long traditions. Poland ranks among the global leaders in many technical fields.

Poland Invests in Defense

Poland is a military power and a key NATO member that invests significantly in defense. Its defense spending already exceeds 4% of GDP. This opens new markets for companies in Southwest Finland. Poland's armed forces are one of the largest in Europe. Poland is also a major customer and partner of Patria. Going forward, Poland has announced plans to triple the size of its armed forces, acquire a massive amount of new equipment, and strengthen and expand defense cooperation with Finland.

The country has also announced the construction of a 700–800 km long East Shield fortification line along the borders with Russian-controlled Kaliningrad and Belarus. The Suwałki Gap between Poland and Lithuania is considered one of NATO's weakest points, as it is bordered by Belarus and Kaliningrad. In addition to fortifications, the border will be equipped with electronic surveillance systems such as listening devices, thermal cameras, signals intelligence, bridges, airports, and roads. This project also offers cooperation opportunities for companies in Southwest Finland, and related ongoing projects are worth following.

Rich Natural Resources Form the Basis of Manufacturing

Poland's industrial foundation is built on rich natural resources: coal and natural gas for energy production, and sulfur, copper, silver, and lead as raw materials. More unique and abundant resources include salt and amber. The most significant industrial sectors are food, automotive, chemical, and machinery and equipment industries, along with state-of-the-art automation and information technology related to these sectors. The steel industry also holds a strong position. Coal production is slowly being phased out in a controlled manner in line with green transition goals.

Poland has a long tradition in manufacturing, and several Finnish companies - such as Patria - have relocated production there. Poland offers companies lower labor costs than Finland, especially in manufacturing, but also a well-educated workforce, a central location in Europe, modern infrastructure, and access to various subsidies and tax incentives. When planning operations in the Polish market, these factors should be considered, and it should be recognized that Poland is a large, competitive, and developed market. Due to its location, Poland also serves as a good hub for the Central European market.

Poland has a strong foundation in technical education and a young, internationally oriented workforce. This also offers opportunities for educational cooperation, internships, and joint training projects.

Agile Cooperation in a Rapidly Changing World

The world is changing rapidly, and companies must be able to respond flexibly. Finnish-Polish cooperation offers an opportunity to combine expertise, resources, and markets in a way that benefits both parties. There is also strong political will to support this.

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WOJCIECH KONOŃCZUK

Poland's Eastern Policy – A Short Introduction

Expert article • 3845

In April 1993, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, the first foreign minister of post-communist Poland, delivered his annual address to parliament. At that time, the country was still in the early stages of a difficult transformation – a process that, in the following years, would lead to NATO and EU membership, and two decades later make Poland widely recognized as an exemplary economic success story.

In his speech Skubiszewski, among other things, stated: "The emergence of a number of independent states [on the ruins of the Soviet Union] has favorably altered Poland's geopolitical situation and created a historic opportunity. (…) Independent, democratic, and secure states along our eastern borders constitute, in themselves, a vital factor in safeguarding Poland's independence, democracy, and security."

These words provided a succinct summary of what can be regarded as the longest-standing doctrine of Polish foreign policy, with roots stretching back to the early 19th century. At that time, Polish politicians and thinkers came to the conclusion that Poland – divided among three neighboring great powers, with the Russian Empire in a dominant position – could only regain independence through close cooperation with other subjugated European nations.

Ukrainians, Belarusians, and Lithuanians, who had once created with Poles the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, were seen as natural allies. This belief was famously expressed by the insurgents of the Polish November Uprising against Russian occupation in 1831: "For our freedom and yours." Today, these words continue to resonate as a powerful slogan among Ukrainians resisting the ongoing Russian invasion.

After the First World War, as Russia was engulfed by the Bolshevik Revolution, efforts emerged to fundamentally reshape the political map of Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish–Ukrainian alliance forged in 1920 sought to bring lasting change to the entire region. On the eve of the joint military campaign to recapture Kyiv from the Bolsheviks, Ignacy Daszyński, the first Prime Minister of reborn Poland, declared during bilateral negotiations: "Now Poland is embarking on the path of a new understanding with Ukraine, and I solemnly affirm that, in my view, there can be no free Poland without a free Ukraine, nor a free Ukraine without a free Poland."

These famous words are often repeated today, particularly by Ukrainians; however, they are frequently and incorrectly attributed to another "classic" of Polish Eastern policy thought, Jerzy Giedroyc, and the second part of the statement is often overlooked. Giedroyc and his émigré magazine *Kultura*, established in 1947 and published in Paris for more than fifty years, played a crucial role in adapting the Polish Eastern doctrine to the post-1945 geopolitical reality.

Kultura, highly influential within Polish émigré circles and the opposition in communist Poland, regarded Russian imperialism as the greatest threat – one that could not be countered without friendly cooperation with the oppressed nations, mainly Ukrainians. This, in turn, required recognition of the post-Yalta eastern border and the emergence of independent states between Poland and Russia.

In 1993, just a year and a half after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it was not yet clear whether the newly established states would be able to safeguard their sovereignty. For Poland, which was the first country in the world to recognize Ukraine's independence, this represented the fulfillment of a task long envisioned by generations of political thinkers who had been shaping the foundations of Polish Eastern policy.

Since then, the key principles of Polish Eastern policy have remained unchanged. Over the past three decades, Poland has consistently supported the independence of Ukraine and Belarus, seeking to strengthen their sovereignty, national identity, and ties with the rest of Europe. This has been an important priority in the foreign policy of every Polish government, treated in a broadly consensual manner.

Today, the whole of Eastern Europe stands at a decisive moment.

Ukraine has effectively defended its freedom against Russian aggressive revisionism, with Poland's military support – particularly during the first months of the full-scale conflict – playing a crucial role. It can be said with a measure of optimism that, although the war is far from over, Ukraine's independence is irreversible and will remain a constant feature on the political map of Europe. Polish-Ukrainian relations have not been without occasional tensions, as is true of any neighboring relationship, but shared security interests will continue to serve as a unifying factor between Warsaw and Kyiv.

Belarus, with its repressive regime vassalized to Russia, presents a more difficult situation, and the future of the country, its national and international identity, has yet to be determined. Poland is among the countries most invested in maintaining Belarus as a sovereign actor in European affairs.

The enduring strength of Poland's Eastern policy over the past thirty years lies in its firm roots in a long-standing tradition and national consensus, combined with a clear awareness of the persistent threat posed by Russia. For the foreseeable future, this threat will continue to represent a key security concern for the entire region.

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Poland–Ukraine: A Return to Business as Usual

Expert article • 3846

After the immense enthusiasm and surge of empathy and pro-Ukrainian sentiment in 2022, following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the year 2025 has brought a painful pushback. The pendulum of public mood in Poland has swung in the opposite direction. Surveys show a deteriorating attitude towards Ukraine, Ukrainians and their status in Poland. The scale of assistance provided to them have become polarizing issues in domestic political debate. This marks a change from the early weeks after the invasion, but in the long run, it represents a return to the *status quo ante*. At the same time, in terms of security and foreign policy, Poland and Ukraine still share a fundamental common understanding regarding the sources of threats to Europe, Russia's strategic and tactical objectives, and the importance of U.S. engagement on the continent.

Poles largely perceive Ukraine through the lens of Ukrainian war refugees. This is now the largest group of Ukrainians in Poland, alongside economic migrants and the Ukrainian national minority of about 40,000 people, who are fully integrated into Polish society. There are nearly one million registered war refugees (with Polish PESEL numbers), and another million economic migrants, although about half of them shuttle between the two countries. The wave of labor migration to Poland followed Russia's initial aggression in 2014. The Ukrainians adapted well in Poland, with high employment rates, particularly in services and the construction/renovation sectors, despite bureaucratic obstacles to legalizing their stay and the lack of dedicated state benefits. Over the eight years between two major inflows in 2014/2015 and 2022, Poles appreciated the Ukrainians' diligence and sociability. Considering the scale and pace of migration, the number of incidents remained surprisingly low. For the first time since World War II, Polish society ceased to be monoethnic, and yet this encounter passed without major friction or conflict.

After February 24, 2022, Poland became the main gateway for Ukrainian war refugees. Over a dozen million them crossed Polish borders, many of whom received temporary, often months-long, shelter in Polish homes. A spontaneous outpouring of compassion for the victims of aggression, combined with fear of Russia, activated the Polish state to take multiple actions in support of Ukraine and Ukrainians. In March 2022, the parliament passed a special act, which not only implemented the EU's Temporary Protection Directive (Directive 2001/55/EC) but also expanded upon it. For example, parents of Ukrainian children under 18 received the so-called 800+ benefit – a monthly payment of nearly €200 per child – regardless of whether the child attended school or kindergarten, or whether either parent was employed. The act also established a *Relief Fund* to finance support activities for the invaded country, both within Poland and abroad.

In 2022, largely thanks to Polish military aid, Ukraine managed to defend itself. As early as spring, Russian forces withdrew from northern Ukrainian regions, effectively saving the capital. In September, Ukrainian forces pushed the invaders out of Kharkiv Oblast, and in November, they reclaimed Kherson. Spirits were high in Ukraine, and preparations began for a spring offensive the following year. However, the Russians entrenched themselves, and the Ukrainian military actions brought mounting casualties instead of territorial gains. Ukraine's financial and military resources were running out, as European stockpiles of weapons and ammunition became increasingly depleted, and the U.S. presidential campaign, ahead of the November 2024 elections, intensified. Nervousness gripped Kyiv, and its foreign policy became increasingly demanding.

The stabilization of the front in Ukraine led to a decrease in fear of Russia in Poland. The national debate, rather than being dominated by the war, shifted to the cycle of elections: parliamentary in October 2023, local in January 2024, European in June 2024, and presidential in May 2025. The campaigns were marked by increasingly sharp and simplistic messaging. One recurring topic was the decision to support full trade liberalization between the EU and Ukraine just after the invasion. This triggered a temporary influx of cheap Ukrainian grain into Poland, causing financial losses for some Polish farmers, who began organizing blockades. Ukrainian authorities downplayed the issue and the sensitive pre-election context, while continuing to demand further support. Accusations made by president Zelensky at the UN in September 2023 – alleging that Poland was helping Russia – provoked outrage across all segments of Polish public opinion. The incident also revived memories of the November 2022 event, when a stray Ukrainian missile exploded in the Polish village of Przewodów, killing two people. Kyiv did not express regret, did not pay compensation to the family, but insisted the missile was Russian, aiming to draw Poland – and by extension NATO – deeper into the war against Russia.

Against a backdrop of unjust remarks by Ukrainian authorities domestic opinions polarized, and successive election campaigns latched onto populist slogans. Russian propaganda and disinformation add fuel to the fire – social media channels were flooded with content inciting Polish hatred toward Ukrainians, stoking jealousy over Ukrainian men driving luxury cars, the attractiveness of Ukrainian women "stealing" Polish husbands, and the allegedly privileged status of Ukrainians compared to hardworking Poles. Russian trolls found fertile ground in historical disputes, particularly Ukraine's long-standing reluctance to permit exhumations of Polish victims on its territory – not only those from the 1943–45 massacres in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia by Ukrainian nationalists, but also from the Polish–Bolshevik War of 1920 or the defense of Lviv in 1939. As a result, Ukrainians ceased to be associated with war and victimhood and instead came to be seen as demanding and cunning (Mieroszewski Centre report, 2025). Numerous public opinion polls have shown that, after a sharp drop in 2023, negative attitudes toward Ukrainians have returned to pre-invasion levels.

As in any democracy, the change in public mood was quickly seized upon by PR strategists, including those advising politicians. Consequently, the so-called "Ukrainian question" became a hot topic in domestic political debate – only now, in contrast to three and a half years ago when politicians competed over who could help Ukrainians more, the contest has shifted to who can cut support more drastically. The dispute between the government and the president, who come from different political

camps, has led to the risk of suspending not only the 800+ payments for war victims, but also the funding from the Relief Fund for storing critical Ukrainian institutional data on servers in Poland, as well as subscriptions for the Starlink systems essential to front-line communication. The latter sparked particular outrage in Ukraine, since Poland is the world leader in providing such terminals to Ukraine – as many as 30,000 – and covering their operating costs.

Despite the changing attitude toward Ukrainians, the perception of the war in Ukraine as an existential threat to Poland has not shifted. Warsaw is heavily arming itself, spending 4.8% of its GDP on defense. While between 2022 and 2024, Poland provided Ukraine with, among other things, 318 tanks, 586 armored vehicles, and 10 helicopters, it continues to support Ukraine's war effort – by mid-September, it had sent its 47th military aid package. The total value of Polish military aid now stands at over €3 billion, and combined with humanitarian assistance, places Poland among the leading donor nations. Warsaw has also declared participation in the "coalition of the willing" and actively coordinates its policies with partners in Europe and the U.S.

In short, bilateral relations on the domestic level have in last 4 years undergone a second shift, returning to business as usual. On the international level, however, support and cooperation remain strong and intact.

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MARCO SIDDI

The Polish-Ukrainian memory conflict

Expert article • 3847

Poland has been a major supporter of Ukraine after Russia's invasion in February 2022. However, shortly after his election as president of Poland in June 2025, Karol Nawrocki declared that he opposed Ukraine's accession to the European Union. A key reason for his stance, as he argued, was the existence of unresolved "important civilisational issues" between Poland and Ukraine. Nawrocki referred to the massacres of an estimated 100,000 Polish civilians in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia (in today's Western Ukraine) by Ukrainian nationalists in 1943.

These events have been studied extensively by a group of historians including Grzegorz Motyka, Andrii Portnov, Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe and Timothy Snyder, among others. Summarizing a complex story, in early 1943 the leadership of the Ukrainian nationalist organisation OUN/UPA decided that Volhynia and Eastern Galicia should be cleansed of ethnic Poles. By doing this, they hoped to ensure that these regions would not become part of Poland after the Second World War (as they were in the interwar years).

The brutal killings of Polish civilians were preceded – and followed – by a series of events that feature in current controversies. The Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) was founded in 1929 and operated in interwar Poland with a strategy of violence and terrorism, inspired by Italian fascism and German national socialism. In the 1930s, Poland was an authoritarian state that often trampled minority rights and aimed to Polonise the eastern 'border' regions (*Kresy*). Even so, OUN remained a relatively small and marginal political force until the war.

The Nazi occupation of Poland in 1939 favoured OUN leaders, who were hosted and supported financially by the occupying Germans in the city of Krakow – while they were repressed in the eastern Polish regions occupied by the Soviets in 1939-1941. The Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 seemed to provide an opportunity to OUN, whose militias seized control of numerous settlements and participated in anti-Jewish pogroms. While Nazi Germany rejected OUN's calls for an independent Ukrainian state, OUN militias enlisted in the German-controlled Ukrainian Auxiliary Police and played a vital role in the execution of the Holocaust in 1941-1942. Following the German defeat at Stalingrad, Ukrainian nationalists left *en masse* the auxiliary police and swelled the ranks of the newly-founded Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), which swiftly turned against Volhynian Poles in spring-summer 1943.

UPA's massacres were followed by retaliatory murders of ethnic Ukrainians conducted by the Polish Home Army in 1943 (with an estimated 10-15,000 dead), mutual deportations from the border regions conducted by communist Poland and the Ukrainian Soviet authorities in 1944-46, and the deportation of post-war Poland's remaining Ukrainians to the west and north of the country during Operation Vistula in 1947.

During state socialism, the memory of these events – including the Volhynian massacres – was marginalised in both the Soviet Union and Poland. After 1989, democratic Poland's acceptance of the post-1945 eastern borders seemed to pave the way for reconciliation, as shown by the first joint Polish-Ukrainian commemorations of the Volhynian massacres in 2003. However, developments took a different turn.

While the Polish side expected official apologies and the designation of UPA as the main perpetrator, the Volhynian massacres remained marginal in Ukrainian official discourse, where events were portrayed as a two-way slaughter. Post-Euromaidan Ukraine fully rehabilitated the UPA and other nationalist groups, drawing parallels between their anti-Soviet struggle in the 1940s and the ongoing Ukrainian fight against Russian invasions in 2014 and 2022. One of the four memory laws adopted by Ukraine in 2015 listed OUN/UPA among 'independence fighters' and forbade the 'public expression of derogatory attitudes' towards them.

In 2016, the Polish parliament adopted a resolution recognising UPA's crimes in Volhynia as genocide. In 2018, it passed legislative amendments including a sentence of up to three years in jail for denying or belittling the Volhynian massacres. Representatives of Poland's then national conservative government declared that Warsaw would make its agreement to Ukraine's EU accession conditional on condemnation of UPA. This stance was widely endorsed by the post-2023 centrist Polish government, while the oppositional far-right party Confederation stoked the memory conflict through chauvinist narratives. Russia reportedly fomented the clash through *agents provocateurs* that defaced memory monuments.

Despite this, there has been some room for reconciliation in Ukrainian and Polish official memories. Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine in 2022 led to a temporary 'memory rapprochement', as highlighted by the joint commemoration of the Volhynian massacres held in Lutsk in July 2023, attended by presidents Volodymyr Zelensky and Andrzej Duda. Ukraine (re)allowed exhumations of Polish soldiers, which had been suspended in 2017.

Yet, the broader divergence of views on UPA and Volhynia remains unsolved. Despite overwhelming evidence of UPA's criminal actions, Ukraine has chosen to honour its fighters. Meanwhile, the relevant Polish debate is ever more politicised. In July 2025, the Polish Sejm voted almost unanimously in favour of creating a day of remembrance of victims of genocide committed by OUN-UPA in the 'eastern borderlands' of interwar Poland, to be held annually on 11 July. Ukraine harshly criticized the decision. Most worryingly, the protracted conflict between official memory narratives is contributing to an atmosphere of resentment, especially toward the large community of Ukrainians living in Poland while war rages in their country.

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Poland and Ukraine: A strategic necessity for cooperation

Expert article • 3848

Poland was the first country to recognize Ukraine's independence on August 24, 1991. This recognition of Ukrainian sovereignty shifted the regional security balance and distanced the historical threat posed by Moscow. Despite the continued existence of the Russian exclave of Königsberg (Kaliningrad), the emergence of a democratic Belarus and an independent Ukraine served as a safeguard against the theoretical reconstruction of the Russian Federation's sphere of influence. From the very beginning, however, the geopolitical trajectories of Kyiv and Warsaw began to diverge significantly.

During the presidencies of Leonid Kravchuk and Leonid Kuchma, Kyiv perceived itself as a "bridge" between the European Community which was increasingly vocal about expanding into post-socialist countries and the Russian Federation, which, following Vladimir Putin's rise to power, began exhibiting clear neo-imperialist tendencies. Poland, though also ruled at times by post-solidarity and post-communist governments, decisively chose a pro-Western orientation, aspiring to join not only the European Union but also the NATO military alliance. This division, rooted in the 1990s, has had a lasting impact on the situation unfolding in Ukraine since 2014.

Between 1991 and 2014, bilateral relations between Ukraine and Poland did not yield significant breakthroughs. Nonetheless, Poland's supportive stance during Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution and the co-hosting of the UEFA European Championship in 2012 contributed to a more positive perception of Ukraine among the Polish public. However, unresolved historical issues, such as the Volhynia massacre, in which Ukrainian nationalists committed atrocities against Polish civilians during World War II, and broader traumas from the German occupation, continued to foster mutual distrust in Polish-Ukrainian relations.

It is worth noting that it was only during Euro 2012 that Ukrainians had their first significant mass opportunity to visit Poland under simplified visa procedures. At the same time, the event brought European tourists to Ukrainian cities like Kharkiv and Donetsk, which previously had little contact with the "West". This relatively underappreciated phenomenon had a considerable influence on Ukrainian society, particularly in the eastern and southern regions where Russian propaganda had been most pervasive. These firsthand encounters with Western lifestyles, as experienced in Poland, led many Ukrainians, particularly the generation born after 1991, to question whether Poland's "western" development model might offer greater prosperity. This shift in perception was a critical factor behind the 2013-2014 Euromaidan movement, also known as the Revolution of Dignity.

Poland, consistent with its long-standing eastern policy, supported Ukraine's pro-Western aspirations. However, this policy has not significantly evolved from the 20th century interwar-era Prometheanism, which sought to weaken Moscow and support independent statehood within the territories of the former Tsarist (and later Soviet) Empire. The contemporary Polish approach is focused on creating political, economic, and cultural cooperation platforms, such as the Lublin Triangle (involving Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine, with the potential future inclusion of Belarus) and the broader geopolitical doctrine of the Intermarium. The "Three seas" initiative brings together 13 European Union member states located near the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas- Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia- representing a combined population of 112 million EU citizens. Ukraine and Moldova currently serve as associated partners. Nonetheless, it is important to recognize that Poland, as a member of both the EU and NATO, primarily fulfils its alliance obligations.

Unlike most Western countries, Warsaw's belief from the outset of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was that such aggression could be successfully repelled by Kyiv. Consequently, it did not symbolically evacuate its diplomatic missions from Ukraine's capital or Lviv and immediately provided military and humanitarian assistance. Meanwhile, other allies hesitated, fearing escalation and broader regional destabilization. In the wake of Russia's 2022 invasion, Poland has increasingly positioned itself not just as Ukraine's advocate, but as a key player for regional security. Its consistent support for Ukraine has earned Warsaw greater credibility among NATO members and within the European Union. Furthermore, Poland's calls for stronger sanctions on Russia, enhanced NATO presence in the region, and broader energy diversification have shifted the balance of influence within the EU and challenged the traditionally dominant positions of Germany and France. This evolution signals Poland's emerging role as a bridge between Western Europe and the Eastern frontier, advocating for a more assertive stance against authoritarian threats. Poland's early military aid was especially effective, as it consisted primarily of Soviet or modernized Soviet-era equipment that Ukrainian forces were already familiar with and could use without additional training. Moreover, repair infrastructure for such equipment was readily available unlike the modern NATO gear provided later. Western military support began to materialize only weeks after Ukrainian resistance demonstrated competence.

Poland has also played a critical humanitarian role during the crisis. It not only opened its borders but provided substantial support to millions of Ukrainian refugees. In many cases, Polish citizens welcomed Ukrainians into their private homes, an invaluable response at a time when central authorities were unprepared for such a massive influx. While this now seems like a moral imperative, it is worth noting that many culturally similar countries have not extended similar support in the wake of other recent global conflicts, even when neighbouring populations faced starvation or war.

Over time, however, Poland's priorities have shifted, both in terms of military and humanitarian aid. As a result of Minsk's artificially created migration crisis on the Polish Belarusian border (with Lithuania facing the same issue), involving refugees from Syria, Afghanistan, and Sudan among others, fears of aggression from the East have heightened. Consequently, Poland is significantly expanding its armed forces and modernizing its military via large-scale arms purchases from the United States and South Korea as well as preparing defence structures to bolster its national defence. This evolving context necessitates a more strategic reassessment

of ongoing military support to Ukraine. It should be emphasized that Poland, as a frontline state, faces different security imperatives than other NATO member states such as Spain or Italy, which at present do not face direct threats on NATO's flank.

Public attitudes toward Ukrainian refugees are also evolving. Some of those currently residing in Poland originate from regions not directly affected by the land conflict, while new arrivals often seek social protection rather than immediate refuge from war. This dynamic has impacted public perception and intensified discussions around creating conditions conducive to the return of refugees to Ukraine, an outcome that could prove beneficial not only for Poland but also for Ukraine's economic and demographic recovery. It is also important to acknowledge that a portion of Ukrainian migrants in Poland are Russian-speaking and, in some cases, hold pro-Russian views or repeat Russian propaganda narratives, which may pose risks to internal security.

In conclusion, the continued existence of a strong and independent Ukraine is essential for Poland, not only from a security standpoint but also for broader social and regional stability. However, despite the early enthusiasm and calls for solidarity, longstanding historical grievances and new strategic challenges are resurfacing. The issues of return, integration, and assimilation of Ukrainian migrants remain unresolved. Therefore, it is imperative that Kyiv and Warsaw create spaces for continued dialogue and cooperation- militarily, economically, and socially- to ensure long-term partnership and mutual security. Looking forward, Poland and Ukraine must not only navigate present-day crises but proactively plan for Ukraine's postwar reconstruction. Polish firms and institutions are well-positioned to assist in rebuilding infrastructure, reforming governance, and restoring economic resilience. A coordinated Polish Ukrainian strategy for recovery, aligned with EU frameworks, could set a precedent for regional post-conflict stabilization efforts. Ultimately, a democratic, prosperous, and secure Ukraine is not just in Poland's interest, it is the cornerstone of a stable European future.

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WITOLD KLAUS & MAGDALENA KMAK

Poland constructs a hostile legal environment towards refugees

Expert article • 3849

Poland, historically an emigration country, has during recent decades undergone a shift towards increased immigration, with migrants now comprising approximately 7% of the population. Despite this demographic change, Poland remains largely unfriendly to migrants, particularly asylum seekers and non-white migrants. Asylum policy has only become more stringent since 2021, when a new migration route was opened, leading through Belarus to the Baltic Countries and Poland. As a result, the Polish authorities have begun to use pushbacks on a large scale, refusing to accept applications for international protection and have started to build physical barriers at the border. Over the following years, these barriers have only been expanded and reinforced. Recent developments, such as the 2024 migration strategy followed by the "legalization" of pushbacks with the suspension of the right to asylum, have further contributed to a hostile legal and societal environment towards migration, disregarding Poland's obligations under EU and international law.

Adopted by the Polish government on 14 October 2024, the migration strategy is a wasted chance to develop a comprehensive and forward looking approach to migration and integration, that Poland has so far been lacking. Instead, the strategy titled "Regain Control. Secure Security: A comprehensive and responsible migration strategy for Poland for 2025-2030" is heavily security-oriented and focuses on the need to control external borders, framing asylum seekers themselves as a threat to the security of Poland. The strategy also signals Poland's intent to introduce a new model of granting international protection by suspending the right to seek asylum, aiming at the same time to reshape EU asylum policy in this respect. The document does not produce facts and lacks analysis to support its claims, and has been adopted without societal consultation, or expert input.

Following the strategy, in February 2025, the Polish Parliament has passed the Act on Amending the Act on Granting Protection to Foreigners, that has entered into force on 26 March 2025. The law has "legalised" the ongoing practices of pushbacks – practices of summarily forcing back people crossing or attempting to cross the international border without an individual assessment of their human rights protection needs. The new law allows for the temporary suspension of the right to seek asylum during situations defined as instrumentalization of migration. The law was immediately enacted and covers the border with Belarus. Under the suspension, Border Guards, without any oversight, can refuse asylum applications in affected border sections, with certain exceptions towards vulnerable groups. This law has been widely criticized by legal experts, civil society, the Ombudsman and the UNHCR for breaching constitutional and international legal obligations, such as the right to seek asylum, the prohibition of non-refoulement and the right to fair trial. This includes Article 18 of the EU Charter on Fundamental Rights, which guarantees the right to seek asylum without exception.

Interestingly, both Poland's migration strategy and the parliamentary debates over the new law included references to Finland and its recently adopted legislation, the Act on Temporary Measures to Combat Instrumentalised Entry, that also allows for the suspension of the right to seek asylum. These statements and references to Finland from government officials and MPs often lack evidence or context, ignoring different situations at their respective borders, including the scale of migration, as well as the legal implications and the actual implementation status of Finland's law. Particularly during the parliamentary debates in Poland, the Finnish law has been characterised as not in violation of international law as well as already operational. It is important to remember that the first argument has been challenged by eighteen Finnish legal experts consulted by the Constitutional Law Committee, who found the law to be in conflict with the Finland's Constitution, human rights obligations and EU law. The second argument is also false, as Finland's law, although passed and recently renewed, has not yet been implemented. Finally, Finnish law also provides asylum seekers with greater protection than the Polish Act. This allows to suspect that Finland's law has been used instrumentally as an already existing precedent to justify the problematic legislative change.

These developments continue to build a hostile environment towards migrants and in consequence, push Poland further away from the EU and international law. More worringly, Poland's criticim towards and wish to reshape the EU law on asylum, supports similar tendencies in other EU countries, such as in Finland and recently Greece, and further undermines the position of human rights in the EU as a whole.

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HANNA TUOMINEN

Polish migration and asylum policy – taking back control?

Expert article • 3850

Introduction

The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine and political instability in Belarus have created high migratory pressure on the EU's Eastern border. Poland has been considered a frontline state, bordering Russia, Belarus and Ukraine. This position challenged Polish migration and asylum policies, as it became a target of several hostile attempts by neighbouring states. Poland is also a destination for more than one million Ukrainian refugees and several Belarusian exiled dissidents.

In this framework, it is not surprising that the Polish government, currently led by Prime Minister Donald Tusk, frames migration with national security concerns. The key objective is to protect the borders and security of Polish territory. The protection of people and borders was also a Polish priority for its Presidency of the Council of the EU in 2025.

The current policy aims to respond especially to threats of instrumentalised migration, experienced by all European countries sharing borders with Russia and Belarus. Since 2021, the governments of these states have facilitated migration movements to pressure and destabilise the EU and individual member states. In Poland, instrumentalised migration is framed as a hybrid threat and a strong common European response is demanded. Most arrivals in the Eastern Polish border have been Afghans, Syrians, Turks and Iraqis.

European Union Framework

In recent years, the EU has received around one million asylum applications annually. Poland is not among the key destination countries for refugees in the EU area. However, it hosts the second largest number of Ukrainian refugees. Since 2022, Ukrainians have had the right to temporary protection in the EU area.

The new EU Pact on Migration and Asylum was adopted by the European Parliament and Council in 2024. The adoption of the Pact equipped the EU with new operational instruments to address the changing migration realities in Europe. It is legally binding and expected to enter into force in 2026. Poland has strongly resisted the implementation, especially the so-called mandatory "solidarity" mechanism referring to the relocation of asylum seekers from member states under migratory pressure. The EU has acknowledged the special situation of Poland and its considerable "burden-sharing" of Ukrainian refugees.

Poland has also struggled with the free movement regulations of the Schengen area. In July 2025, Poland reinstated temporary border checks along the borders with Germany and Lithuania in response to public concerns over irregular migration. The decision was related to tightening border procedures in Germany and the fear of receiving back undocumented and illegally entered migrants. Even if the numbers are not significant, political posturing on stricter migration policy is essential for governments in both countries.

Taking back control?

Even if Poland is not a key destination for asylum seekers, in 2024, the number of applications has increased remarkably, with over 15,000 people applying for asylum. The main countries of origin include Ukraine, Russia and Belarus. However, there are also applications from Africa and the Middle East, especially on the Belarusian border.

In 2024, Poland adopted a new migration strategy, "Taking back control. Ensuring Security. Poland's Comprehensive and Responsible Migration Strategy for 2025-2030". The comprehensiveness refers to different regulations for various migration categories: students, workers, family members, and refugees. The key objective is to control foreigners', especially asylum seekers' access to Poland. The strategy also aims to streamline migration processes and create an effective return system. The new legislation also includes the possibility of withdrawing refugee status. However, legislation includes exceptions to protect vulnerable groups.

Poland experienced more than 30,000 attempted border crossings from Belarus in 2024. According to the government, people came from 51 different countries, with the greatest numbers from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia and Syria. Consequently, Poland aims to make the border "impenetrable" by creating a buffer zone and a temporary ban on entry to prevent illegal crossings. Several civil society organisations have also reported on pushbacks along the border.

Anti-immigration sentiments and weakening standards

The changes in Polish legislation continue to implement a strict migration and asylum policy. They respond to the increasing anti-immigration sentiments in the country. This also influences the Ukrainian refugees, as nationalists demand decreasing their benefits and services.

At the individual level, the reported pushbacks endanger the right of individuals not to be returned to countries where they could face prosecution, torture or inhumane treatment. Hence, Polish policy also contests the norms of international, EU and human rights law. Also, activists who help migrants at the border are punished, which restricts the space for civil society.

Poland's refusal to implement common EU policies undermines efforts to create a homogenous EU-wide migration framework. Country-specific exceptions also decrease the credibility of common Schengen border regulations. Overall, the weakening standards influence the EU's image as a human rights defender.

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ESRA AĞRALI

Strategic bridge of NATO: Türkiye-Poland cooperation

Expert article • 3851

The geopolitical positions and regional security priorities of NATO members have been crucial to the Alliance's transformation since the end of the Cold War. Thus, Türkiye and Poland are prominent countries that strategically complement each other on different flanks of NATO. While Poland assumes the primary role in the Alliance's Eastern front against the Russian threat, Türkiye is tasked with addressing security concerns in the Middle East, Black Sea, and Eastern Mediterranean in the southern region. Recent years have seen both countries augmenting NATO's deterrent capabilities through increased defence expenditures and active roles within the Alliance. When the mediation initiatives and defence industry contributions of Türkiye are considered in conjunction with Poland's direct military engagements and its hosting of NATO forces on its territory, a strategic bridge is built between the eastern and southern flanks of the Alliance.

Black Sea has maintained its importance in terms of security activities since the Cold War period. The Turkish Straits are gates that open the Black Sea to the Middle East; thus, NATO assigned Türkiye as the power in its southern flank to monitor the Black Sea and mitigate potential risks in the region. NATO's 2023 Vilnius Summit features a notable focus on the Alliance's Southern flank, which is viewed in NATO documents as a key frontline in the Alliance's struggle against Russia, Iran and China. The report, released in May 2024, highlights three key points regarding the region: Russia's role in fueling regional instability and tensions; the threat to NATO's maritime security posed by Russia-Iran cooperation; and China's growing influence on military and naval forces, as well as its control over ports. Thus, Türkiye's importance for NATO for regional security and stability is steadily increasing as the second most significant military power of the Alliance, also allocating its defence spending to 2.09% of GDP as of 2024, representing an increase of approximately 39%, aligning with NATO's criteria, which made a substantial contribution to burden sharing within the Alliance.

On the other hand, Poland possesses a deep prudence against external threats, since Nazi Germany and the USSR occupied it in the 20th century. Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea caused a shift in Poland's defence policies, but the real turning point came with the full-scale invasion in 2022. The country's historical memory and geopolitical proximity to Russia have led it to adopt rapid and radical defence policies in the aftermath of the war. As of 2024, Poland had the highest defense expenditure among the NATO countries, allocating more than 4% of its GDP to defense in 2024. It aims to increase this ratio to 4.7% by 2025, which would leave all allies behind, including the US. Poland has emerged as the most significant logistical and operational centre in the Eastern flank of the US and NATO. The US Army V. Corps Forward Command in Poznań, the Aegis Ashore missile defence site in Redzikowo and the massive equipment storage facilities in Powidz are significantly boosting NATO's deterrence capacity in the region. Moreover, the logistics centre in Rzeszów (*POLLOGHUB*) facilitates the transit of 80% of aid to Ukraine.

Both countries are strategically crucial for NATO by their positioning on either side of the Alliance, each with its own distinct priorities. However, the common point that the two countries share in NATO is being the most critical allies against the Russian threat. Poland, due to its geographical location, is the most critical NATO country that Russia could target after Ukraine. It has a dual role as both a front line and a strategic buffer zone for Europe's defense. On the other hand, Poland's aspiration to be Europe's largest conventional army by 2035 is essential not only in relation to Russia but also in terms of the balance of power within NATO. Therefore, this military capacity makes it a natural candidate for critical roles such as NATO Land Forces Command (*LandCom*). Positions of this kind, which Türkiye has traditionally dominated due to its superior land power, may become a new arena of competition. This situation creates a new power dynamic that could mean both cooperation and competition for the two countries. However, there is cooperation rather than competition between them in defense. Poland and Türkiye have a trade capacity of approximately $12 billion and aim to increase it to $15 billion. Poland signed an agreement with Türkiye to purchase 24 *"Bayraktar TB2 UAVs"*; this is important since it marked the first time a NATO member country had purchased UAVs on this scale. The agreement was also considered a turning point in the acceptance of Turkish defense industry products by NATO. After the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, this purchase became more meaningful, as TB2s were proven systems in terms of both deterrence and operational effectiveness. This sale strengthened Türkiye-Poland relations not only diplomatically, but also through defense industry cooperation, and Poland views Türkiye as more than just an NATO ally- a reliable partner. Moreover, during its EU Council Presidency from January to July 2025, Poland adopted the motto *"Security, Europe!"*; Donald Tusk's visit to Türkiye in March 2025 highlights how Poland also considers Türkiye a strategic ally for the EU's defense structure. Consequently, the technology sharing and cooperation between the two countries opens a new dimension within NATO, and a strategic rapprochement in Türkiye-Poland relations.

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The slow death of democracies: Lessons from Poland and Georgia

Expert article • 3852

Poland and Georgia show how democratic backsliding works today: not by cancelling elections but by staffing, steering, and starving checks while keeping democratic ritual intact. The playbook travels through legal design: appointments, disciplinary rules, prosecutors, media governance, and competition law. Other drivers exist, including societal resilience and citizen mobilization in defense of institutions, but for reasons of scope, this piece focuses on the legal instruments of capture, where the patterns are clearest and remedies most concrete.

Both projects began with palatable promises. In Poland after 2015, Law and Justice (PiS) framed reforms as "de-communisation" and efficiency; in Georgia since 2012, Georgian Dream (GD) invoked "Europeanisation" and a return to "order". These narratives led to technical reforms - who appoints judges, who disciplines them, who runs public media, whose veto counts - felt like neutral housekeeping rather than deliberate transfers of power.

Capturing the referees

Poland hollowed out constitutional review by electing Tribunal judges in breach of rulings and refusing to publish judgments - turning a ministerial duty into a political veto. It repoliticised the National Council of the Judiciary (KRS), giving parliament control over judicial seats and generating "neo-judges." Georgia built an analogue via a tight "judge clan" in the High Council of Justice (HCoJ), monopolising careers and discipline. Amendments in 2025 expanded the number of judge-members, abolished the inspector's office, concentrated disciplinary power in the secretary, strengthened court chairs, restricted recordings, delayed publication of rulings, and sharply raised salaries tied to the state budget. In both states, constitutional review and judicial careers were placed on political rails while formal structures endured.

Discipline and prosecution

Poland's Supreme Court Disciplinary Chamber chilled judges, while combining the Justice Minister and Prosecutor General roles concentrated investigative power. Georgia broadened disciplinary offenses like "improper performance," raised penalties, and imposed isolation rules that cut judges' professional contact. The shared message: conform quietly or risk your career.

Media and information

PiS reshaped public broadcasters and attempted "Lex TVN" to curb private ownership. GD paired ownership pressure with politicised rulings (notably Rustavi 2) and stigma laws: a 2024 "foreign agents" label for NGOs and media and, in 2025, punitive cases including the jailing of an independent outlet's co-founder, the first female journalist in Georgia recognised as a prisoner of conscience. Neither model imposed blanket censorship; both sought agenda control and deterrence, shrinking pluralism without abolishing it.

Civil society and surveillance

Poland deployed Pegasus spyware against opposition figures, lawyers, and activists. Georgia's civic sector, long a watchdog for transparency and rights, now faces severe pressure: in August 2025, the government, for the first time in independent Georgia's history, froze accounts of 7 leading NGOs - under false claims of aiding protests, building on broader harassment via the Foreign Agent Law. Such steps silence dissent, cut oversight, and deprive citizens of trusted information.

Elections remain; the level field does not

Neither government banned competition; both tilted it. In Poland, weak campaign-finance oversight, public-media dominance, and covert surveillance undercut fairness. In Georgia, parliament bypassed checks, rushed polarising bills, neutralised presidential vetoes, and altered electoral rules to entrench GD. Competition remained in form; equality receded in substance.

The EU factor

EU membership both enabled and constrained Poland. PiS used European resources and legitimacy, but EU law and conditional funding later created costs for capture and tools for rollback. After the 2023 alternation, rule-of-law "super-milestones" reopened funds and supported reversals of disciplinary and media capture, though with contested legality. Georgia's constitution (Art 78) obliges institutions to pursue EU integration, but being outside the club left only soft leverage: candidate status froze while visa-free travel is at risk, with penalties arriving late and consolidation biting deeper.

Outcomes

Poland lives with dualism: a contested tribunal, "neo-judges," and public-media resets via debatable tools. Funds flow again, but a single, accepted legal order still requires statute-anchored settlements. Georgia shows consolidation: opaque courts, authoritarianism on the rise, shrinking civic space, and a stalled EU track. Citizens pay first - fewer remedies, poorer information, and deeper distrust in authority.

What repair requires

Repair must be institutional, not charismatic. It means depoliticised judicial appointments; narrow, reviewable grounds for discipline; separation of prosecutorial and ministerial chains; transparent and merit-based court leadership; safeguards for independent media financing and ownership; and civic-space rules that protect NGOs. Externally, conditionality must apply early and predictably. Internally, reversal must rest on statute, inclusivity, and procedural precision, or it risks a new cycle of contestation.

Core lesson: backsliding today is legalist. It advances through councils, chambers, budgets, and licences. Defending rule of law means hardening those circuits against capture, before the next majority learns the same playbook.

Resilience has to be both institutional and civic. Poland's 2023 election showed that citizens can still push back against an entrenched ruling party when information flows remain plural and coordination is possible. But it also exposed how difficult it is to reverse capture once it sets in: dual legal orders, disputed judicial appointments, and politicized media do not disappear the day after an election, especially when a strong PiS electorate and even harder-line actors remain in play. The 2024 Parliamentary Elections in Georgia offer a darker mirror. Loyalty-based appointments, punitive disciplinary rules, and stigma laws against NGOs and media have steadily narrowed the space for mobilization, allowing the ruling party to hold on despite waves of protest. The lesson is that defenses have to be built in two places at once: 1. through robust, depoliticized appointment and disciplinary systems, and 2. by sustaining investments in civic capacity: independent media, watchdog NGOs, legal aid, and public trust.

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Poland's Next Leap: From Investment Magnet to Global Investor

Expert article • 3853

Few countries in Europe have transformed as profoundly as Poland over the past three decades. Transforming in the early 1990s from a centrally planned economy to a market led system, Poland has grown into one of the largest and most resilient markets in the European Union. With over 38 million consumers, a strong industrial base, and steady growth track, Poland has become a magnet for foreign direct investment. European, American, or increasingly Asian firms have increasingly recognized Poland as a reliable location at the heart of Europe, close to both Western markets and the rapidly changing East.

Poland's course to international business

Poland's evolution matters not only for the country itself but for the entire Baltic Sea region and Europe as a whole. As one of the region's largest economies, Poland acts as a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe. Its stability, reliability and attractiveness to foreign investors help anchor the region in global value chains. The question, however, remains whether Poland can move from being primarily a host for foreign investment to becoming its source – an active outward investor shaping industries across Europe and beyond.

International business theory suggests that countries follow an "investment development path", a model developed by the late economist John H. Dunning whereby they first attract foreign capital and later set their own firms to expand abroad. Poland has so far been highly successful in the first part of this journey but has not yet fully embraced the second stage. Despite solid growth and EU membership, the country still remains far more attractive for foreign companies coming in than for Polish firms expanding abroad.

Explaining Poland's paradox

Several factors explain this situation. Poland's large domestic market still draws multinationals eager to expand locally, while reducing the urgency of the drive of domestic firms to internationalize. Many foreign investors view Poland as a mid-developed economy, dynamic and promising, yet still not fully on par with Western Europe. As a result, the most competitive, innovative, and technology-intensive operations often stay in the hands of foreign affiliates, while Polish firms remain focused on domestic and regional markets.

Policy choices have reinforced this pattern. Successive Polish governments have actively supported the attraction of foreign investors, offering generous incentives and stimulating integration European supply chains. Yet the same intensity of support has not been focused on Polish firms seeking to build global brands or acquire assets abroad. Compared with policies pursued by many Western European or Asian countries, the toolbox used in practice for supporting outward investment still remains relatively limited.

External shocks have also shaped the investment development path trajectory. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted growth and investment, while Russia's invasion of Ukraine created new uncertainties. But at the same time, these crises have also strengthened Poland's strategic role in Europe. Multinational companies increasingly view today's Poland not only as a production hub but also as a safe location in a turbulent region, reinforcing the country's status as an investment magnet.

The emerging outcome appears as a paradox. On the one hand, Poland's performance is rated as one of Europe's best success stories: a top recipient of foreign capital, an economy that avoided recession during the financial crisis, and a pillar of regional security in the face of geopolitical turmoil and uncertainty. On the other hand, its own companies have yet to become truly global players on a significant scale. Without this step, Poland risks being locked into a role as a host economy, rather than moving to be a full-fledged participant in shaping the European and global economy.

Next steps for Poland

Looking ahead, Poland's next leap requires a more balanced approach. Attracting foreign investors should, of course, remain a priority, but equal or greater emphasis should be placed on encouraging Polish firms to expand abroad. This means providing targeted support for internationalization, from financial instruments and credit guarantees to diplomatic backing and market intelligence. It also requires investing in innovation and technological capabilities at home, so that Polish firms can effectively compete with foreign players that dominate many sectors.

A second priority should be to foster stronger linkages between foreign investors and local firms. Too often, the knowledge and technology brought in by multinationals remain confined within their subsidiaries. Policies that encourage partnerships, joint ventures, and supply chain integration can help domestic companies upgrade their competitive potential and subsequently expand into foreign markets.

Finally, Poland could further strengthen its role as a regional leader and integrator in the Baltic Sea area. By promoting cross-border cooperation, supporting regional infrastructure, and investing in new industries such as green technologies and digital services, Poland can leverage its size and location to drive growth for the entire region.

Poland has already achieved a remarkable transformation. The next step is to match its success as an incoming investment host with an equally strong record as a global investor. This will not happen overnight, but without such a shift, Poland risks plateauing below its true potential. For the Baltic Sea region and for Europe, Poland's leap forward is not only desirable – it is necessary and may prove beneficial for all involved.

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LESZEK BALCEROWICZ

Return to Privatization – Essential for Poland's Economy

Expert article • 3854

The last 35 years have been a period of unprecedented economic success in Poland as well as in the Baltic countries. This was due to the shift from the socialism to capitalism with lots of competition and to macroeconomic stabilization. The radical reduction of the state sector's share in the economy took place both through enabling of the creation and growth of new private companies, and through the privatization of state-owned enterprises.

As a result, Poland and the Baltic states have been rapidly catching up with the West. In 1990, Poland's GDP per capita, measured in purchasing power parity, amounted to 37% of the OECD average. By 2022, it had reached 81% (OECD data).

However, privatization in Poland was halted after 2015 and even partially reversed through a series of nationalizations.

The share of state ownership in the Polish economy remains high. It amounts to 16% of value added (IMF 2019), placing Poland at the bottom of the European Union. The situation is much better in the Baltic states: in Latvia and Lithuania the share is around 6%, and in Estonia is only 2–3%.

In Poland, in particular, restarting and finishing privatization should be a priority. A frequently raised argument to justify a large state share in the economy is the need to control key sectors or markets against hostile influence, notably from Russia. However, such a protection does not require extensive state ownership — these tasks should be carried out by regulatory bodies. The legal tools already exist in Poland: the government can block the sale of companies critical for national security by placing them on the appropriate list. Other hostile actions by third countries in a given market can be blocked by the relevant regulatory and competition authorities.

Empirical research clearly shows that economies dominated by private ownership perform much better and grow faster than those dominated by state ownership. The same applies at the sectors: industries dominated by state ownership are less efficient and develop slower than those dominated by private ownership. Thus, defense or energy sectors should also be private, as it is the case in most Western economies.

A large share of the state sector is also dangerous to democracy. Through their influence over appointments to state-owned enterprises' management boards, politicians gain the ability to use these companies' resources to influence the election outcomes. State television may favor the ruling party, while other state firms may — even indirectly — finance the electoral campaign of a specific party. These are not abstract scenarios. Such practices occurred under PiS government in Poland and under Orbán's FIDESZ in Hungary. Better management rules or appointing managers through open competitions do not eliminate the influence politicians exert over state-owned companies. Political pressure affects management boards, which may take decisions that are harmful to the company and its shareholders but politically profitable for the ruling party.

Poland should pay particular attention to the pillars of her own success. Completing privatization will increase economic growth and through it will strengthen the military security of the country.

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** I am grateful to Bartłomiej Jabrzyk for his assistance.*

WOJCIECH GIZICKI

Poland's security geopolitics in crisis times in 2025

Expert article • 3855

Poland's security results from its geopolitical situation. This fact holds regarding every historical period Poland has gone through. Located in Central Europe, between Germany and Russia, its East-West route brings certain opportunities but also challenges. This is fundamentally important today in light of Russia's neo-imperial, aggressive policies, the war in Ukraine, and the hybrid conflict on the border with Belarus.

Russia is striving to reclaim its position from the Soviet Union era, both for global significance and territorial resources. After 1945, Poland formally remained a sovereign international entity. Despite its close political and military dependence on the USSR, it was not, however, a Soviet satellite state. In this way, its contemporary geopolitical position is somewhat different than, for example, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, the Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. These countries constitute the so-called near abroad, which is Vladimir Putin's primary political and military objective. This does not change the fact that Poland, a large country in Central Europe with considerable geopolitical significance, poses a serious obstacle to Russia achieving its neo-imperial ambitions. A particular message on this was the words of the late Lech Kaczyński, former President of Poland, who died in the unexplained Smoleńsk catastrophe in 2010. Addressing a delegation of leaders from Central and Eastern European countries (Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine) during the 2008 conflict in Georgia, Lech Kaczyński in Tbilisi told them: *Some believe the nations around them should be subordinate to them. We say no! That country is Russia. (...) And we also know perfectly well that today it's Georgia, tomorrow Ukraine, the day after tomorrow the Baltic States, and then perhaps it's time for my country, Poland!* Hence, solidarity among the region's countries and strong cooperation within relations with the US, NATO, and the EU are crucial. For geopolitical reasons (its location, size, and population), Poland can and should play a leadership role in this cooperation, in the spirit of *Primus inter pares.* Experiences in the last few years, recent months, and even days show the seriousness of the threat looming over this region, especially on Poland's side closest to Russia. Already in September 2025, Poland's airspace was violated several times by Russian unmanned aerial vehicles, most likely flying in from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. These are no longer individual incidents. On September 10, 2025, several such objects entered Poland's territory and were shot down by Poland's air defense. This is Poland's first time using such military resources to counteract a very serious provocation. As a consequence, NATO is also involved through the invocation of Article 4 of the North Atlantic Treaty. Poland's decisive military response demonstrates its absolute refusal to accept these provocations, which constitute a complete crossing of the "red line."

An independent, sovereign Ukraine is an important element of Poland's security. Nevertheless, the full-scale war in Ukraine that started in 2022 is a serious challenge for Poland. This is due to Poland's long border with Ukraine (535 km). Poland is experiencing the consequences of this war, both directly and indirectly. On November 15, 2022, in Przewodowo (eastern Poland), rocket fragments exploded as part of Ukraine's defensive operations against Russian shelling. Two Poles (civilians) died as a result. However, Poland unequivocally stands with Ukraine, providing multifaceted support. This support has both a military dimension, in the form of equipment and defense logistics, and a social dimension. Since the beginning of the war, Poland has provided unconditional assistance to several million war refugees. In 2025, there are over one million registered Ukrainian refugees in Poland. The territory of Poland is the main and basically only region supporting the auxiliary activities for Ukraine. Without the Rzeszów airport and the A4 motorway, such large-scale defense assistance would be essentially impossible. The ongoing war in Ukraine has multifaceted implications for Poland. However, Russia is taking numerous actions aimed at escalating potential bilateral problems between Poland and Ukraine. These have both historical and contemporary roots, including the unprecedented scale of Ukrainian refugees in Poland. Good relations between the two countries are in their shared interest. Therefore, it is essential to build mutual relations based on the fullest possible understanding and agreement.

Belarus is a tool in Russia's hands, subordinated to accomplish Putin's strategic goals. All nations bordering Belarus are experiencing this situation. For Poland, the hostile policy generated by Alexander Lukashenko has both geopolitical and social dimensions. First of all, the Polish-Belarusian border is the subject of a hybrid war, using illegal migrants as a political weapon. Illegal migrants are regularly transferred onto Polish territory, even forced to break the law, often using force and aggressive behavior. One of the victims of these actions was a Polish soldier serving on the border, who died on June 6, 2024, after being stabbed by an aggressive illegal migrant. Several other soldiers were injured while defending the Polish border against similar hybrid attacks. The increasing wave of illegal border crossings is negatively affecting the feeling and level of security in Poland. This situation is intensifying due to Poland's overlapping and complex relationship with Germany, also along the border. Controversies are taking place in relation to German services sending illegal migrants into Poland, supposedly ones who trespassed the German border from the Polish side. Also, Belarus supports Russia, and their joint Zapad military exercises and Russia's hybrid actions have resulted in the decision to close Poland's border with Belarus as of September 11, 2025. Second, Poland pays the price on the social level due to the anti-Polish activities of the Belarusian regime, targeting people and institutions of Polish origin. Some Poles in Belarus are experiencing persecution and even imprisonment (e.g. Andrzej Poczobut). Activities that maintain Polish traditions and rituals are hampered.

Therefore, Poland must constantly strengthen its security. This is a multidimensional, complex activity that must take into consideration the degree of our geopolitical condition. The success of our work primarily depends on the connectivity and efficiency of those leading our uniformed services. Citizens themselves must also take on significant responsibilities, as they must be able to meet these challenges and skillfully respond to threats. Finally, it is essential to maintain close allied cooperation, particularly within NATO and the United States.

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RADOSŁAW ZYZIK

Guns, Butter, and Poland's Future

Expert article • 3856

Since 2014, when Russia seized Crimea and ignited a war in eastern Ukraine, the sense of security in Central and Eastern Europe has steadily eroded. NATO and the European Union responded by reinforcing their defence efforts, yet for Poland the situation grew even more fragile after 2020, when Belarus began orchestrating pressure and destabilisation along the Polish border. The real turning point came in February 2022 with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From that moment, the strategic landscape changed irreversibly, and Poland's political elites came to see the strengthening of national defence capabilities as not merely a policy choice, but as an existential imperative.

Poland's financial commitment is without precedent. Analysts estimate that between 2025 and 2035, the country will spend nearly 1.9 trillion PLN on defence, more than double the 825 billion spent in the previous decade. These outlays are not one-off investments: servicing equipment, training personnel, and securing spare parts will lock in high costs for years. Government plans foresee defence spending peaking at 4.8% of GDP in 2026, with levels remaining close to 4% thereafter almost twice as high as in 2022, when the share was only 2.2%. For comparison, this would make Poland the NATO member with the highest defence burden relative to GDP, even as the state budget is projected to run a deficit of 6.5% of GDP in 2026.

In the short run, such massive outlays will generate a strong demand impulse for the Polish economy, with sectors from construction to machine maintenance and logistics benefiting from new contracts. Yet the longer-term picture is more complex. Poland will eventually face a choice between raising additional revenues, through higher taxes or contributions, or reducing spending in other strategic areas such as healthcare, education, or the green energy transition. In the event of economic shocks or financial crises, the proverbial "black swans", sustaining defence expenditure at nearly 4% of GDP could become a formidable challenge. This raises the fundamental question: what, in practice, are the consequences for Poland of maintaining defence spending at such extraordinary levels?

The economic effects of military expenditure are far from uniform. In highly developed economies, such spending can spill over into civilian sectors, driving innovation, dual-use technologies, and long-term competitiveness. Advanced industries and research systems make it easier to turn "guns" into "butter" as well security and prosperity reinforcing one another. In less developed economies, however, such diffusion is harder to achieve. Here, defence often competes directly with civilian needs, creating the classic trade-off: guns or butter. Poland, standing somewhere in between, faces uncertainty. Elevated military expenditure could stimulate innovation and growth, but it could also crowd out private investment and strain social priorities if the balance is not carefully managed.

A critical issue lies in the structure of Poland's military expenditure. Today, around 60% of procurement flows abroad, bypassing domestic industry. This reliance on foreign suppliers was reinforced after 2022, when the urgency of war on NATO's eastern flank left little choice but to buy ready-made solutions from allies. Such imports deliver immediate security gains but risk cementing technological dependency and slowing the development of local competencies. Over time, however, Poland aims to shift the balance: the government's target is for at least half of defence spending to be realised domestically. Every złoty (the Polish currency) spent at home is not only a purchase of equipment but also an investment in industrial capabilities, universities, and the innovation ecosystem.

The labour market adds yet another layer of complexity to the debate over whether defence spending is an opportunity or a burden. Nothing, of course, compares to the devastation that a Russian invasion of Polish territory would bring. Yet even in peacetime, the economic trade-offs are significant. Poland today enjoys one of the lowest unemployment rates in the European Union - around 3.5%. At the same time, the government plans to expand the professional army to 300,000 soldiers. This expansion, combined with higher military expenditure, effectively means drawing workers away from the private sector or attracting them from abroad. The challenge is magnified by global competition: defence industries in the United States, Germany, or Scandinavia are already racing to hire engineers, IT specialists, and skilled technicians.

In the end, the impact of Poland's record-high military expenditure will depend less on its size than on its design. If channelled into domestic industry, research, and dual-use technologies, it can become a driver of modernisation. If spent mainly abroad, it risks becoming a heavy burden with limited returns.

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Making the Most of Scarce: Poland in the OSCE

Expert article • 3857

Poland's participation in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and then the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is active yet pragmatic. Poland perceives the OSCE as part of the European security architecture, yet soberly assesses the organisation's capabilities, significantly shortened by the decisional deadlock and the unpunished violations of the OSCE's principles by some of its participating states. While Poland is unable to alter the political landscape, it contributes to make the organisation work against all odds.

From the Beginning

Poland is a co-founder of the CSCE/OSCE. Warsaw has been a seat of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR, and its predecessor, the Office for Free Elections) since establishment thereof in the 1990s. and Polish Ambassador Andrzej Kasprzyk was the longest-serving Personal Representative of the Chairperson-in-Office on the conflict dealt with by the OSCE Minsk Conference (1997-2021), to mention but a few.

The country has twice held the chairpersonship of the organisation, in 1998 and 2022. Statistically, this places it among those that have held this position most often, on a par with 7 of the 57 participating states, such as Austria, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland. While there is no country that has held the chairpersonship more times, there is a large group of countries (30 out of 57) that have not held it at all. Politically, this sends a sign of trust of 57 participating states given that the OSCE Ministerial Council decides by consensus on the chairpersonship. And both statistically and politically there is no doubt that Poland is unlikely to receive another mandate to hold this position any time soon due to its strong opposition to Russia's full-scale attack on Ukraine and its other responses thereto.

(Re)inventing Solutions

During its chairpersonship in 2022 – the year Russia launched a full-scale attack on Ukraine – Poland adopted a no-business-as-usual approach towards the aggressor, knowing that he would use it to put into question the chairpersonship's role of the honest broker. One of the manifestations of Polish stance was the refusal to issue visas to Russian delegates for the Ministerial Council in Łódź in December 2022. Although, in order to preserve the organisation, which faced the risk of simultaneously lacking top 4 officers, chairpersonship for 2024 and a new budget due to Russian veto, this approach was altered by subsequent chairs – Macedonian in 2023 (which solved some of these problems) and Maltese in 2024 (selected at the turn of November and December 2023), it sent a clear signal condemning the aggressor's actions. Moreover, the Polish chairpersonship put forward some new solutions that are still in use today.

One of these is the Warsaw Human Dimension Conference, which has been organised as a replacement for the Human Dimension Implementation Meetings, blocked by Russia. The event has been organised in the Polish capital by successive chairpersonships for four years now, with the support of the ODIHR. The Conference brings together hundreds of participants, including OSCE and state officials, activists and experts to discuss the human rights situation in participating countries, as well as the OSCE's initiatives aimed at strengthening respect for human rights.

Another example of circumventing the Russian veto is the so-called SPU – OSCE Secretariat Extra-Budgetary Support Programme for Ukraine, launched on 1 November 2022 following the non-extension of the mandate of the OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine, developed with the support of the chairpersonship. Poland is still involved in the project today, along with 35 other donors, including the EU and some non-OSCE states.

Final Remarks

The OSCE is not a panacea for all regional security issues, but it remains a component of the security architecture that Poland supports and uses in its foreign policy, while realistically assessing its potential impact. The September drone attack on its territory is a reason to activate the mechanisms provided for in the 2011 OSCE Vienna Document, but Poland is aware that the commitments made within the OSCE are not sufficient to convince the aggressor to provide explanations or stop escalating. When Warsaw advocates the continued existence of the OSCE, it is not to make it compete with the EU or NATO, in which Poland places its greatest hopes for multilateral cooperation. It recognises the value of the OSCE as a platform for dialogue from Vancouver to Vladivostok, and as the only organisation apart from the UN that connects it with countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus yet it does not have excessive expectations of this cooperation. Whenever Poland supports the repeated activation of the Moscow Mechanism to investigate human rights violations by Russia or Belarus, it is aware that this will not have a sudden effect on the regimes in question. However, it recognises that this will send a clear message to perpetrators and facilitate accountability in the long term. When Poland proposes or provides assistance to creative solutions that enable the OSCE to maintain its achievements, it takes into account that this may sometimes involve ensuring the continued operation of such solutions beyond the organisation's formal structure.

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Poland's Struggle for Political Clout Given the War, American Uncertainties and the Need for European Partnerships

Expert article • 3858

Russia's full-scale invasion in Ukraine has had far reaching implications for Poland. Not only did Poland turn into a frontline state and a key supporter of Ukraine, it appeared to be a new powerhouse in the structures of the West. A debate about a shift to the East in Europe started, which meant that the proactive countries along the Eastern borders of EU and NATO were supposedly beginning to become more important, i. e. to attain more influence. Poland as the country with the biggest potential in the region, seemed to become a regional leader with new opportunities to co-shape European and even transatlantic agendas.

There were various sources for that perceived ascent of Poland. The intake of hundreds of thousands of refugees from Ukraine after February 2025. Poland was called a "humanitarian superpower".

Military investment, ambitious programs to modernize its armed forces and high defense spending amounting to more than 4% of GDP, making the country the frontrunner on defense budgeting in NATO.

Epistemic power, i. e. Poland arguing that since many years it has had the expertise and experience to form an adequate assessment of Russia, of the threats it poses and the policies that the West should have pursued. Particularly vis-à-vis Germany, which had to come to terms with the collapse of its Ostpolitik, Poland appeared as country, who has disposed of the right statecraft in Eastern affairs and security policy. Whereas Germany for a long time had continued to cling to the Nord-Stream-2 project and energy cooperation, Poland, after some delay, had implemented a policy of diversification in oil and gas supplies reducing dependency on Russian imports.

Poland tried to coordinate its efforts to support Ukraine and to contain Russia with like-minded countries on the Eastern flank of NATO or in Northern Europe, thus trying to be a coordinator of interests of Central Europe, a proactive advocate in NATO's front-line group and of course a champion for a bold backing if Ukraine.

Particularly, Poland became a major partner for the US, for whom the country was a logistical hub to send assistance to Ukraine, a vital military ally in the region and a reliable political "teammate" in Europe. Poland, after February 2022, could deepen its anyway strong military, security and diplomatic bonds with the US. Poland's plans to buy key defense systems for its armed forces from the US is just one element of this emerging "special relationship."

In sum, Poland as a security provider and an emerging political big-league player seemed to box above its weight. However, soon it became obvious that this was by far no linear process. Poland's efforts did not turn necessarily in more political significance. Here also, a number of reasons has played a role.

Russia has become more unpredictable and has sent more than just warning signals to Poland. Poland has been the target of manifold hybrid attacks and incidents from the migration crisis at the border with Belarus, over arsons in Polish cities, cyber attacks and more recently air space violations by drones. This all has shown the various vulnerabilities, despite substantial efforts to build more resilience and an effective defense.

Relations with Ukraine have become strained. Whereas Poland continues to be a firm supporter of Ukraine in its fight for independence, bilateral relations are more complicated. Squabbles over historic issues, conflicts in the context of EU market-liberalisation for Ukrainian agricultural products or for lorry-drivers from Ukraine and a growing aversion against welfare-schemes for Ukrainian refugees in the society have soured the interaction between Warsaw and Kiev.

In the military domain, debates have begun, if the ambitious plans for the modernization of the armed forces are realistic – given demographic restraints, continuing deficits in military capabilities and still-existing shortages e.g. in ammunitions. The then head of the national security office BBN declared in March 2025 that with current ammunition stocks, Poland could defend itself only for one or two weeks. Another debate was reinvigorated after the drone incidents of September 2025, when more than 20 Russian drones entered Poland's air space and a lack of anti-drone capabilities became visible. Many experts have began asking if the expensive acquisition of what they call "legacy systems", like heavy battle tanks, fighter jets or helicopters is the right way in times of 21st century warfare and given the lessons from the war in Ukraine.

Last but not least: New uncertainties with the US have emerged, since the Trump administration has come to power. Whilst Poland's national-conservative camp and president Nawrocki (who was elected in June 2025) entertain close relations with the Trump administration and continue to trust in US security guarantees for the Eastern flank, the government camp has a more balanced approach, trying to consolidate relations with the US, at the same time building new bridges to partners in Europe. Irrespective of the US president's commitment (in a meeting with Nawrocki) to maintain US troop presence in Poland or to even increase it, there are doubts about the prospects of American engagement in Europe and on the Eastern flank. Particularly, the Trump administration's (for the time rather inconclusive) efforts to engage Russia or to strike a deal with Moscow on Ukraine, Washington's diplomatic contacts with Belarus, but also a more fundamental US strategic reorientation toward the Indo-Pacific has brought about doubts, about the viability of US-Polish relations in the long-term. In any case, relations between Poland and the US cannot be taken for granted as a power-amplifier for Warsaw's standing in Europe.

Hence, it appears as a key challenge for Poland to find an appropriate Euro-Atlantic path. That means to reconcile the necessity to maintain strong ties with the US and to pursue the efforts of making NATO more effective on the one hand, with new partnerships in Europe and the use of the EU as an additional source for improving Poland's security on the other hand. The latter direction has developed remarkably. Poland has signed new bilateral accords with a strong defense or security dimension: with France, with the United Kingdom, with the Netherlands or with Sweden. Also, minilateral formats, among others meetings with the Baltic States or the Nordic Baltic Eight group, gathering with Germany and France in the Weimar Triangle or in the Weimar Triangle Plus format (including also the United Kingdom or Italy) have been one of the visible effects of this new networking. Poland has also discovered the EU as a valuable framework for enhancing security, which can contribute funds for armaments industries (Poland is the biggest beneficiary from the EU's new Security Action for Europe initiative) or help improving military mobility. Consistently, Poland has tried to bring more security to the EU, during its council presidency in the first half of 2025.

Against this background, security and defense cooperation with Germany has still considerable potential, even though important cooperation does exist, e. g. in the Baltic Sea or with German patriot systems deployed in South-Eastern Poland and German jets participating in the air policing missions in the Polish air. All in all, in order to become a stronghold on the Eastern flank with political clout in Europe, Poland will have to find ways to combine its US and its European dimensions of foreign and security policy.

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Poland at the Crossroads: From Frontline Security to Economic Heavyweight in a Turbulent World

Expert article • 3859

Poland in 2025 finds itself at a historic crossroads. It is simultaneously a frontline state at the eastern border of the European Union and NATO, and an emerging economic heavyweight. In 2024, the country crossed the symbolic threshold of one trillion US dollars in GDP, placing it among the world's top 20 economies. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, the weaponisation of migration on the EU's eastern frontier, instability in the Middle East, and rising tensions between the EU, the United States and China all converge to reshape Warsaw's role. No longer a peripheral observer, Poland is expected to be an active shaper of regional and global politics.

Frontline security and regional leadership

Poland embodies Europe's security dilemmas. It is exposed to hybrid pressures from Belarus and Russia, including cyberattacks, disinformation, and attempted sabotage of energy and transport infrastructure. At the same time, Poland is transforming this vulnerability into a platform for leadership. Defence spending has exceeded 4% of GDP, the highest in NATO, underlining Warsaw's determination to act not only as a consumer of security but also as a provider of stability. Cooperation with Baltic and Nordic partners is deepening, particularly in the protection of the Baltic Sea and in joint procurement. The country's alignment with the United States remains strong, yet Poland is also reintegrating into the EU mainstream, seeking to influence debates on enlargement, resilience, and the defence of democratic values.

Economic ascent: from megaprojects to technological leadership

Crossing the trillion-dollar GDP mark reflects a decade of robust growth and integration into European value chains. Poland is no longer merely a low-cost manufacturing platform: it is becoming a logistics, production, and technology hub for central and nore thern Europe. Recent projects underline this shift. The Baltic AI Gigafactory – a €3 billion initiative linking Poland with Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia – is set to boost Europe's competitiveness in artificial intelligence and advanced semiconductors, cementing Poland's role in cutting-edge industries.

Infrastructure megaprojects are equally transformative. The Centralny Port Komunikacyjny (CPK) aims to be Europe's newest intermodal hub, connecting air travel with high-speed rail and regional transport. Rail Baltica, under construction, will finally link Warsaw with Tallinn via a modern high-speed line, binding the Baltic States more closely into the EU core. The Port of Gdańsk continues its expansion as the largest container port on the Baltic, while LNG terminals in Świnoujście and Gdańsk secure diversification away from Russian energy. Offshore wind adds a new dimension: the Baltic Power project, developed jointly by Poland's Orlen and Canada's Northland Power, will install over seventy turbines off the Polish coast and is set to provide clean energy to more than a million households. Nuclear power projects, launched with American and Korean partners, will anchor Poland's low-carbon transition.

Challenges

Poland's rise also brings heavy responsibilities. First, managing the triple transition – in energy, security, and digital technologies – in a time of geopolitical instability is no simple task. The nuclear programme, offshore wind farms like Baltic Power, and the Baltic AI Gigafactory promise transformation, but their delivery will test state capacity and political stability.

Second, catching up economically remains a central objective. Crossing the trillion-dollar GDP mark is symbolic, yet Poland still competes with higher-productivity economies. The competitiveness of Polish industry and the ability of private enterprises to scale globally will determine whether the country's growth is sustainable – or stalls at the middle-income trap.

Third, the strategic question looms: what vision does Poland offer for the future of European security? NATO's credibility, the EU's capacity to act in defence, and the role of external powers like China in Europe's economy and infrastructure will shape the continent's architecture. Poland has the potential to be not just a frontline state, but a thought leader in defining this new order.

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The balancing act of Polish defence

Expert article • 3860

Poland has become a central actor in NATO's eastern deterrence strategy, scaling up defence spending nearly fivefold over the past decade and aiming to field the European Union's largest land army. While this military build-up has enhanced operational capacity and alliance integration, it has outpaced developments in civil protection and strategic autonomy. Poland's evolving defence posture illustrates the challenges of aligning hard power with societal resilience and long-term sustainability.

Since joining NATO in 1999, Poland has transformed its Cold War-era mobilisation force into a modern, NATO-compatible army. Deployments to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Balkans provided operational experience and exposure to Western doctrine. Yet until Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, investments remained modest, and much of the force relied on Soviet-era equipment.

The full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 marked a turning point. Poland's defence budget rose from €9 billion in 2014 to €43.5 billion in 2025—equal to 4.7% of GDP, the highest in NATO. Military personnel more than doubled to over 200,000 in 2024, with a 2035 target of 300,000. The creation of the *Territorial Defence Forces* in 2017 added a community-based reserve, enhancing both capacity and cohesion.

Modernisation spans all branches. The army is acquiring Abrams and K2 tanks, HIMARS systems, and new howitzers. The air force is integrating F-35s, Apaches, and Saab 340 surveillance aircraft. The navy is investing in multi-role frigates and advanced minehunters. Poland also became the first country outside the United States to adopt the Integrated Battle Command System, digitally linking its air and missile defences.

Defence ties with the United States remain central to Poland's security, anchored by the permanent presence of US forces formalised in 2020, including the V Corps Forward Command and multiple support units. The 2024 activation of a US missile defence site in Redzikowo further embedded Poland into NATO's deterrence architecture. Yet uncertainty over US commitments amid shifting domestic politics has led Warsaw to accelerate domestic defence production and press for deeper European cooperation. This pivot, however, faces structural constraints: while European industry is expanding, few suppliers can yet match the scale, speed, or technological breadth needed to sustain Poland's rearmament.

Hybrid attacks involving the instrumentalization of migrants—allegedly orchestrated by Belarus since 2021—prompted Poland to fortify its eastern border with Belarus and Kaliningrad. A 186-kilometre steel barrier and surveillance systems were installed to deter irregular crossings. In 2024, Poland launched the €2.3 billion 'Eastern Shield'—its largest defence infrastructure project since the Cold War—combining layered fortifications, anti-tank systems, AI surveillance, and electronic warfare. While reflecting heightened insecurity, the initiative raises concerns over long-term sustainability, civil liberties, and the limited role of EU and NATO in co-financing such projects.

Civil protection remains a major vulnerability. In 2022, fewer than 4% of Poles had access to functioning shelters, many of which failed basic safety standards. Public warning systems and evacuation protocols were outdated or absent. The *2025 Civil Protection Act* mandates shelter coverage for 50% of urban and 25% of rural populations by 2032, backed by an annual allocation of at least 0.3% of GDP. The Act enables full state funding for priority projects and promotes dual-use infrastructure. Implementation is shared among local authorities, emergency services, and national crisis bodies under the Ministry of the Interior. While the law signals a shift toward greater civilian resilience, concerns remain over local capacity, feasibility, and public engagement.

Public preparedness efforts have also expanded. A 2022 civil crisis guide encourages household self-sufficiency during the first 72 hours of an emergency. Voluntary programmes such as *Train with the Army* and *Vacations with the Army* offer civilians basic training in firearms, first aid, and crisis response, fostering military–civilian ties.

Poland's rapid military build-up has enhanced its strategic standing—but exposed the limits of a defence model built primarily on hard power. Without robust civil protection, public preparedness, and sustainable procurement, its deterrence posture risks overextension. The balancing act of Polish defence now lies not merely in its arsenal, but in its ability to integrate military strength with societal resilience.

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Poland needs to fill the gap in its defence potential

Expert article • 3861

Poland is rapidly strengthening its military potential in order to maximize its ability to defend its territory and provide support to threatened allies. Although it is increasingly well prepared for a traditional conflict involving tanks, aircraft, and missiles, Russia's drone attack on Polish territory on 10 September has shown that asymmetric conflict using cheap, mass-produced unmanned systems also poses a threat. Poland and other countries are much less prepared for such a scenario.

Russia, as a revisionist state that has not come to terms with the collapse of the USSR and the loss of its sphere of influence in Central and Eastern Europe, poses a strategic and direct military threat to Poland. The goal of Russian policy is not only to subjugate Ukraine, but also to force the West to make concessions on the demands presented by the Kremlin in the form of an ultimatum in December 2021. Russia demanded that NATO and the US not only withdraw their troops to pre-1997 positions, but also sign treaties that would limit NATO's ability to send reinforcements to Russia's neighbors. In a worst-case scenario, Russia could provoke a war with countries on NATO's eastern flank, including Poland, and then threaten nuclear escalation to try to prevent the rest of the Alliance from providing them with significant support and seek to force concessions.

The change in strategic realities, linked to the US perception of China as the main threat and its reduced interest in supporting European security, encourages Russia to continue its war with Ukraine and maintain its maximalist demands, but also to intensify its aggressive actions against NATO. This increases the risk of Russian aggression against the Alliance, especially if European countries fail to significantly strengthen their defence capabilities within the next few years.

Poland takes Russian threat seriously and is trying to strengthen its military capabilities as quickly as possible. The Polish army currently has about 200,000 soldiers, including 160,000 on active duty and about 40,000 in the territorial defense forces. By 2035, it is planned to increase this number to 250,000 active duty soldiers and 50,000 territorial defense troops. Within a few years, four landforces divisions should be fully prepared to repel a potential attack from the territory of Belarus and the Kaliningrad Oblast. By 2029, the land forces will be armed with approximately 1,200 mainly modern Leopard, K2, and Abrams tanks (currently approximately 750) and several hundred MLRS launchers. The air force will have approximately 1,000 JASSM missiles, most of them in the extended-range versions. At the beginning of 2025, the armament agency responsible for modernizing the armed forces was implementing over 460 arms contracts worth $135 billion.

Ambitious technical modernization is supported by record-high defense spending. In 2024, Poland's defense budget amounted to approximately $35 billion (PLN 140 billion), or about 3.8% of GDP – the highest percentage in NATO. In 2025, this spending is expected to reach 4.7% of GDP, or over $40 billion. Such a high level of spending is possible thanks to public acceptance and political consensus, but also to the good condition of the Polish economy. Since 1990, Poland's GDP has grown by over 800%. In 2025, Poland joined the group of 20 countries whose GDP exceeds one trillion dollars.

It will be difficult for Russia to carry out scenarios of aggression that may involve the occupation of Polish territory. The enormous losses Russia is incurring in the war with Ukraine for at least several years lower the risk of full-scale aggression against Poland and other NATO countries. However, Russia may try to push Poland into a gray zone of security by provoking an asymmetric conflict using drones and missiles. The attack carried out on 10 September, when Russia directed about 20 drones at Poland, clearly indicates such a threat. Just like in Ukraine, Russia may use cheap, massively produced drones and gliding bombs to turn the conflict into a war of attrition, hoping that it will be able to persevere longer and force political concessions. The likelihood of a drone and missile war is increased by the defensive nature of NATO, which has difficulty responding to attacks that do not constitute full-scale military aggression, with troops phisically enetering NATO's territory. In addition, Russia may be encouraged to escalate by serious deficiencies in the air and missile defense capabilities of the European part of NATO.

Poland is developing an ambitious plan for a multi-layered air and missile defense system consisting of modern sensors and effectors. However, this is a process that will take up to a decade. By 2035, Poland will have a system based on eight Patriot batteries, hundreds of launchers with British CAMM missiles, 32 fifth-generation F35 fighter jets and 96 Apache helicopters. However, these advanced capabilities will primarily provide the ability to combat cruise and ballistic missiles. Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine shows that Russia is capable of carrying out an attack using up to 800 drones in a single day. Some of them are decoys designed to saturate air defences, while the rest are strike drones designed to sow death and destruction.

Combating such threats will require Poland and other allies to develop cheaper, mass-produced anti-drone systems. They can include Electronic Warfare Systems, lasers, drones, missiles ect. The proper combination should provide the capability to destroy hundreds of enemy drones at a relatively low cost. The development of such system is long overdue. The attack on Poland shows that Russia has found a gap, which it is likely to continue to exploit.

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Unprecedented strengthening of Polish defence

Expert article • 3862

Poland has never been in a favourable geostrategic position in terms of defence. Over the centuries, wars have raged here, borders have shifted, and with them, the country's size and population. We have bordered on various neighbours and belonged to various alliances, depending on our historical location and the political pressure we find ourselves in. Broadly speaking, true stabilization of the security situation began with Poland's accession to NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. But how long will it last?

The situation has changed dramatically since the outbreak of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in 2022, but more pronounced symptoms of a worsening security situation in our part of Europe appeared after the Russo-Georgian conflict in 2008 and then in 2014, when Russian little green men launched a hybrid war in Ukraine. Although Poland has always supported strengthening NATO's defence capabilities, and changes in the functioning of the Alliance have occurred slowly and gradually, in fact, the main milestones that initiated more significant changes were those initiated at the NATO summits in Wales in 2014 and in Warsaw in 2016.

Strengthening the capabilities necessary for the collective defence of all NATO member states, in accordance with the principle of solidarity enshrined in Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, is crucial. However, developing the capabilities of national armed forces is equally important. Therefore, Article 3 of the Treaty must not be forgotten. This provision truly underpins the principle of solidarity and mutual defence within NATO. Although not as important as Article 5, it underpins the effective functioning of the Alliance, enabling member states to effectively defend themselves against threats. It concerns self-help and mutual support among NATO member states. It stipulates that member states should ensure their own defence capabilities to defend themselves effectively and commits states to continuously develop their defence capabilities to counter potential threats. This is precisely why Poland has long strived to systematically improve its combat capabilities. Although it is not the wealthiest country in the Alliance (or even in Europe), it spends relatively the most on defence among all NATO members. The burden on members was intended to be fair and based on the percentage of GDP each member state allocates to its own defence.

Defence spending in 2025 is expected to reach 4.7% of Poland's GDP. This will be another year of consistent growth. According to NATO data, Poland's defence spending estimates for 2024 are 4.12% of GDP and 3.26% for 2023. We'll see what the final statistics for 2025 say, but in 2024, according to a NATO report, Estonia will be in second place (3.43%), the United States in third (3.38%), Latvia in fourth (3.15%), and Greece in fifth (3.08%). At the same time, only these five countries will spend more than 3% of their GDP on defence.

It's no surprise that among the countries investing the most in their own defence capabilities are those closest to the potential threat, like Poland. Unfortunately, it's common practice for wealthy Western countries, located farther from the source of potential threats, to spend far below their economic wealth and still fail to exceed the long-established 2% spending threshold, which hardly constitutes an expression of allied solidarity.

Currently, only 23 of NATO's 32 member states will reach 2% of GDP this year. Many countries are struggling to achieve this goal. Simply put, increasing this goal to 5% of GDP on defence, as agreed at this year's NATO summit in The Hague, will pose a significant challenge for many countries that have already announced they will not meet this commitment.

The increase in member states' defence spending to 5% of GDP over the next decade is planned to involve 3.5% of GDP for core defence, and the remaining 1.5% for defence-related spending, such as critical infrastructure protection, network defence, civil preparedness, and innovation.

In nominal terms, Poland currently ranks fourth in Europe, after Germany, the United Kingdom, and France. Traditionally, the leader is the United States, which NATO estimates will spend nearly $1 trillion on defence. All other member states will spend less than $100 billion, although Germany is very close. Poland ranks fifth, followed by Italy, which plans to spend slightly less this year.

Poland, as the only NATO and EU member state bordering both the attacked Ukraine and the aggressor, Russia, has drawn conclusions from recent events and quickly become a leader in NATO not only in terms of defence spending, but also in the field of military procurement with a huge scale of investments.

What equipment is Poland purchasing? It's worth mentioning some of the purposes for which these enormous sums will be allocated. In recent years, Poland has been implementing an unprecedented program of modernization and expansion of its Armed Forces. The largest arms contracts concern the purchase of modern weapons systems and equipment. These include 32 F-35 multi-role aircraft and 48 FA-50 light fighters from South Korea. Polish F-16s are also being modernized to the highest standards. Of particular note is the order for 96 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters, which will make Poland the second-largest user after the United States.

Armoured forces are also being rapidly developed. Poland has ordered 360 K2 Black Panther tanks from South Korea and 250 American M1A2 Abrams tanks. Together with its existing Leopard, T-72, and PT-91 tanks, by 2030 Poland could have more tanks than France, Italy, and the United Kingdom combined. At the same time, it is purchasing and modernizing hundreds of armoured personnel carriers and infantry fighting vehicles, such as the domestically produced Borsuk and Rosomak under the Patria license. The Navy is also seeking modernization, planning to purchase frigates under the Miecznik program and a one submarine (at this stage) under the Orka program.

Air and missile defence systems are also crucial. Under the Wisła (with Patriots) and Narew (with CAMM missiles) programs, Poland is implementing medium- and short-range systems integrated with the American Integrated Battle Command System (IBCS). The contract for its delivery and integration in Phase II of these programs is one of the most expensive, worth many billions of dollars.

At the same time, artillery is being developed—both conventional and rocket-propelled. The Polish Armed Forces are strengthening their capabilities by purchasing hundreds of domestically produced Krab and Korean K9 howitzers, as well as hundreds of American HIMARS and Korean Chunmoo missile systems. New areas, such as cyberdefence, electronic warfare, and unmanned systems, are also playing an increasingly important role. Significant funding is being allocated to individual soldier equipment.

Needless to say, modernization also requires the development of training and logistics. Training packages and simulators are being developed, and military infrastructure, warehouses, and service centres are being expanded. Ammunition purchases are also enormous. The pace of orders is rapid. Such a large number of purchases and parallel activities makes it difficult even for experts to clearly determine which orders are already being fulfilled and which are still planned. The ambitious pace of modernization raises questions about the feasibility of deliveries and the possibility of fully implementing such a large number of systems. These are, of course, only flagship examples intended to show the scale of the effort undertaken.

The destinations from which orders will be fulfilled are also worth considering. Although the Polish arms industry is playing an increasingly important role, the main foreign partners remain American and—surprisingly for many—South Korean companies. This strategy, however, means that Poland may lose access to some EU defence funding programs, which only support purchases from European manufacturers. The government argues that in the face of the Russian threat, it is better to take on debt and be well-armed than to remain defenceless.

It is important to mention the established "Eastern Shield" program, planned for 2024–2028. This project aims to strengthen Poland's resilience to kinetic attacks and hybrid warfare. It includes the construction of fortifications, strongpoints, early warning systems, the protection of critical infrastructure, and cooperation with NATO allies to enhance deterrence. Although it draws on the experience of the war in Ukraine, it is defensive in nature – primarily intended to protect soldiers and civilians, as well as ensure readiness to defend borders.

There is no doubt, however, that Poland is currently undertaking its greatest effort in decades to build a modern armed forces numbering 300,000 determined soldiers and equipped with state-of-the-art equipment, to achieve defence capabilities that will make Poland not only a regional leader but also a strong NATO ally. The main goal of these efforts is not only to modernize the armed forces but, above all, to ensure the security of its citizens and deter potential aggressors.

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Poland: Facing the Russian threat

Expert article • 3863

Poland's geostrategic location is crucial for Europe's security, especially in light of Russia's aggressive attempts to rebuild the former Soviet empire and restore its past power. Bordering both Kaliningrad and Belarus—sites of military exercises such as Zapad 2025 designed to intimidate NATO—Poland serves as both a "gatekeeper" against potential attacks on Central and Western Europe and a "land bridge" linking Western Europe with the Baltic states and Ukraine. Any subordination or partial occupation of Ukraine elevates Poland's role as a frontline nation, making Ukraine's victory and integration with NATO, the EU, and the democratic world essential. Poland's security policy reflects a profound distrust of Russia's willingness to coexist peacefully. Lately, violations of Polish, and NATO, airspace and hybrid attacks are clear evidence of hostile intentions targeting the Poland and democratic nations.

Warsaw's substantial investments in defence highlight its credibility as a reliable and capable ally. At the same time, Poland recognizes that in the event of Russian aggression, it must be prepared to defend itself before allied forces are fully deployed, particularly land forces. While unity under NATO's Article 5 remains vital, Poland also emphasizes the importance of Article 3. Currently, it allocates 4.7% of GDP to defence—an effort supported by both government and the society—funding six divisions and several independent units equipped with modern weaponry acquired through ambitious modernization programs. Key initiatives, such as expanding drone capabilities and revitalizing the defence industry, reflect lessons drawn from the war in Ukraine.

EU support through the ReArm Europe / Readiness 2030 program provides tangible benefits, but timely implementation remains a challenge. As a result, some capabilities will not reach the desired level before 2030, while others may be delayed even further. Poland also plans to expand its armed forces to 300,000 personnel, including 250,000 professionals and 50,000 members of territorial defence units. These measures strengthen deterrence and enhance Poland's credibility within NATO and the EU, presenting it as a reliable contributor to the defence of the Alliance's Eastern Flank. Still, political and diplomatic efforts are as critical as the military ones: maintaining strong alliances has never been more important. NATO and EU membership, the strategic partnership with the United States, and regional cooperation remain cornerstones of Polish security. Advancing national interests will require skilful diplomacy that unites rather than divides key partners.

The Ukrainian experience demonstrated how an attempted "blitzkrieg" can quickly devolve into a war of attrition, requiring mobilization reserves and robust defence industry capacities. Both deterrence and defence must be reinforced. Poland's defence industry, however, is not yet fully prepared to sustain long-term combat operations with sufficient ammunition, new equipment, or repair facilities. Transitioning the sector into crisis and war mode will require new legal frameworks and deeper integration with allied defence industries.

Another neglected area has been preparing society for crisis and war. For too long, the focus remained on the military instrument of power and NATO's security guarantees. The war in Ukraine sparked overdue debates about civil defence, resilience, and the integration of civilian efforts into national security. Today, education includes pro-defence curricula and practical training, while media and social platforms promote citizen contributions to security. This strengthens resilience against Russian propaganda, as well as hybrid and cyberattacks, and fosters a culture of resistance. Allocating 0.3% of GDP annually to civil defence is a prudent step.

Poland is building a comprehensive system of total defence, supported by new funding, regulations, and stronger military capabilities designed to protect both the state and its citizens, an improvement of relations between military and civilian entities, the private sector and the public sector or national and international companies needs attention. The Russian threat will stay, and there is consensus among Polish politicians and the population that she cannot be trusted. This is an impetus to enhance national capabilities utilising all resources with the support of NATO and EU partners. The time factor is playing a role as aggressive Kremlin narratives, underpinned the wartime industry and military build-up, leaving no hope for any change of imperialistic ambitions. The consensus among political elites to cooperate on national defence, stability and investments in instruments of national power require complete agreement across all public administration levels. Defence spending must be treated holistically to include military domain and civil society to develop effective national defence system in years to come.

A key challenge in Poland is a deeply divided society, marked by animosity between the government and the opposition party. This undermines the continuity of security decisions and weakens the country on multiple fronts. It could undermine Poland's alertness to confront Russia and to address the consequences of hybrid attacks. Military modernisation requires a collective endeavour among parties, although some disagreements have arisen, and certain projects have been decided upon without thorough study based on political choices. The adoption of the total defence concept will enhance Poland's and regional stability, deterrence and defence posture based on reliable military capabilities, well understood by Russia. The combination of professional and territorial defence forces, operational preparation of terrain, resilient society and a dependable military industry reflects power. As the NATO member, Poland must also ensure its decisions remain aligned with regional defence plans, recognizing that in the first wave of aggression it will be Polish forces—backed by a resilient society—who bear the initial burden of defence. The European Union must remain a central pillar in supporting diverse Polish security domains, not solely through its substantial allocation of €43.7 billion to Poland under the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) initiative, but by embodying the unity and resolve of European nations in confronting the enduring threat posed by Russia. Finally, the strategic partnership with US is confirmed and extremely important; however, any 'pivot' of the US foreign policy could cause reduction of US involvement in Europe.

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Do the right thing: A Polish view of the Russian threat

Expert article • 3864

On the night of September 9-10, around twenty Russian drones violated Polish airspace, flying over both Ukraine and Belarus. Some were intercepted and destroyed by Polish and allied aircraft. While the material damage was minimal, **the incident marked the most serious provocation from Russia against Poland to date**. It underscored the escalating nature of Russian aggression in Europe, which, though primarily aimed at Ukraine, is not confined to its borders. Moscow's intentions were clear: to intimidate Polish society, sow divisions among European political elites, expose the vulnerabilities of NATO and the European Union, and dissuade us from our steadfast support for Ukraine. Though the immediate result was the opposite—uniting Poland and Europe, and reaffirming the allies' commitment to Kyiv—there is little reason to believe the Kremlin will desist in its attempts to test our resolve.

This provocation serves as a stark reminder of the nature of the Russian threat: direct, persistent, and systemic. Moscow's ambitions extend far beyond territorial gains in Ukraine, or even the strategic subjugation of its sovereign neighbor. The Kremlin's broader goal is to dismantle the European security architecture, undermine NATO, weaken the EU, and establish a security buffer zone across Central and Northern Europe. It seeks to push the United States out of the continent and drive a wedge between Europe and its transatlantic partners. This is part of a larger Russian vision for a new global order, one in which Russia, in alliance with China, seeks to marginalize Western influence and create a world more amenable to authoritarian regimes.

Russia's brutal war on Ukraine, with its widespread devastation and staggering toll in human lives, is the most important but not only front in a broader conflict being waged against the West and its allies. Increasingly, Moscow's tactics—ranging from massive disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks to political assassinations, sabotage, and the weaponization of energy and migration—defy the conventional notion of "hybrid warfare." In Russian strategic culture, the lines between war and peace are intentionally blurred, with the aim of demoralizing, destabilizing, and ultimately neutralizing the adversary. The Kremlin's actions place us, by its own design, in a de facto state of war with Russia. In such a reality, decisive action is not just necessary—it is urgent.

Poland has long sought to set an example in the face of this threat, demonstrating its resolve. Our strategy has been multifaceted: First, we have entirely severed our dependence on Russian energy, halting imports of crude oil, natural gas, coal, and petroleum products, while diversifying our energy sources. Second, we have bolstered our borders with Russia and Belarus, foremost by building physical barriers and surveillance systems to counter hybrid warfare and armed provocations. Third, we are investing heavily in defence—our military spendings set to reach $55 billion in 2026, or 4.83% of GDP—and our strategy emphasizes deterrence, with a focus on acquiring capabilities able to inflict significant losses on Russian and Belarusian forces. Fourth, we are strengthening our cooperation with NATO, the EU, the United States, and the United Kingdom, as well as with regional partners, especially likeminded, such as the Nordic and Baltic states, the Czech Republic, and Romania. Finally, Poland remains unwavering in its logistical, military, political, and economic support for Ukraine.

Despite growing war fatigue in some Western states, it is essential to remain focused on the right course of action. This requires rapidly fortifying our own defense capabilities and resilience, expand - especially military - support for Ukraine, to shift the momentum of the conflict. Additionally, there is an urgent need to intensify significantly economic sanctions on Russia, raising the cost of its war efforts. The Baltic Sea region plays a pivotal role in this strategy. Legislative changes and expanded physical capabilities are needed to counter Russian threats, including those posed by the so called shadow fleet operating in the Baltic Sea. Closer collaboration among Baltic Sea states could produce synergies, enhancing collective security and mitigating risks to military, economic, and environmental stability.

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Poland and regional security cooperation formats

Expert article • 3865

After more than 25 years in NATO and 20 in the EU, it turns out that the Nordic-Baltic area has become the largest 'reservoir' of like-minded allies for Poland, where new prospects for cooperation are opened up by Finland and Sweden's membership in the Alliance. The region has never been as integrated as it is today. As such, it features various, often overlapping formats of political and military cooperation (complemented by developing bilateral strategic partnerships). Poland is a member of several of them including the Northern Group, the Bucharest Nine, and the Council of the Baltic Sea States.

Launched in 2010, the UK-led Northern Group has been a forum for consultations among the defence ministries and military leadership of the United Kingdom, the Nordic and Baltic states, the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland. It is primarily focused on security issues in Northern Europe, including the Baltic Sea region and NATO's northeastern flank. These meetings are also aimed at coordinating positions within NATO. Denmark hosted the most recent gathering in November 2024, which was attended by Ukraine's minister of defence and minister of strategic industries. The discussions focused primarily on continued military support for Ukraine and cooperation with its defence industry.

Poland and the Baltic states participate in the Bucharest Nine (B9) – a platform for consultations and coordination among the leaders (heads of states) of the eastern flank countries (from Estonia to Bulgaria) ahead of NATO's summits since 2015. In June 2024, the prime minister of Sweden and the president of Finland attended a B9 meeting for the first time. Owing to the positions of Budapest, Bratislava and partially Sofia on Russia and Ukraine (the last two B9 summits did not adopt a joint statement), the security interests of the other B9 countries are now more closely aligned with those of Sweden and Finland than with Hungary, for instance. Representatives of all Nordic states participated in this year's B9 summit in Vilnius (2 June).

The Council of the Baltic Sea States (CBSS) – with its permanent secretariat in Stockholm – is the only forum that includes all countries from the region except Russia (the European Union is also a member). Moscow withdrew from the organisation in May 2022, following its suspension by the Council. To date, the CBSS – spearheaded by foreign ministers – has focused on cultural and educational projects, 'soft' security (combating human trafficking), and sustainable development. Council's agenda is set by a rotating one-year presidency held by successive members. On 1 July this year, Poland assumed the CBSS presidency from Estonia.

Poland remains outside two increasingly important regional groupings - the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF) and the Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8). Established in 2014, the JEF comprises the United Kingdom, the Nordic and Baltic states, and the Netherlands. It was designed as a multi-domain rapid reaction force of like-minded partners, capable of deploying up to 10,000 troops. Although originally intended for crisis response operations beyond Europe, today its geographical centre of gravity lies in the Nordic and Baltic region, the North Atlantic, and the Arctic. The JEF has conducted regular military exercises in the Baltic Sea area. Its operational response mechanism was first activated in November 2023, following damage to the Finnish-Estonian Balticconnector gas pipeline.

The NB8 has evolved from a mechanism used by the Nordic countries to support the Euro-Atlantic integration of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia into a platform for coordinating actions and advancing shared interests, particularly in the fields of foreign and security policy. The format is well-tailored to small, like-minded countries in the region, enabling them to present a unified position on key issues. Cooperation within the NB8 intensified following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Over the past three years, Nordic-Baltic consultations have focused on supporting Ukraine and Moldova, tightening sanctions against Russia and its 'shadow fleet', strengthening NATO's north-eastern flank, countering hybrid operations, increasing resilience to non-military threats, expanding energy cooperation and coordinating actions towards Belarus and Georgia. The platform currently includes summits of heads of government, meetings of foreign and defence ministers, state secretaries, and MPs, as well as joint visits to third countries. Each year, a different capital chairs the NB8 (Copenhagen in 2025). In 2024, Sweden, which acted in this capacity, invited the Polish foreign minister and prime minister to the NB8's meetings. Last April, the group held its first meeting with representatives of the Weimar Triangle at foreign minister level.

In order to reinforce the northern pillar of its foreign and security policy, Poland should consider partnering with the JEF by participating in its military exercises in the Baltic Sea region and coordinating positions with the NB8 more frequently. Furthermore, Warsaw should support the continued involvement of the Nordic countries in the B9, without ruling out a formal expansion of the platform. Poland should also use its CBSS presidency to transform the organisation in line with the recommendations set out in the report by Toomas H. Ilves and Gabrielius Landsbergis on future orientation of the Council (2025). The CBSS could assume a greater role in regional cooperation to counter Russian hybrid threats. That should include the protection of critical underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea and hindering Russia's 'shadow fleet'.

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Poland's Long Road to Energy Transition

Expert article • 3866

The energy transition in Poland is being delayed. For years, the priority has been on the security of supply of gas and oil, not on decarbonisation. Although Poland has managed to increase the share of renewable energy sources (RES) in the energy mix, the country still relies on fossil fuels and the transition has not become part of a lasting, cross-party consensus.

Poland's energy transition is a race against time. Although binding energy and climate policy targets were already adopted at EU level in the 2000s, Poland, which is heavily dependent on fossil fuels, for many years focused its energy policy on the security of fossil fuels' supplies. This applied in particular to the gas sector and the plans announced in 2016 to become completely independent of Russia. Although these plans were successfully implemented, mainly thanks to the construction and commissioning of the regasification terminal in Świnoujście in 2015 as well as the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline in 2022, the dependence of the economy and the energy sector on fossil fuels remained at a very high level in the first three decades after regaining sovereignty, with coal dominating electricity sector and heat generation.

Although some progress was made in Poland in the area of energy transition between 2015 and 2023, particularly in terms of increasing the share of solar energy in the energy mix and reducing fossil fuel emissions as part of the EU 2020 target, the authorities at the time did not show much interest in actually accelerating the process of change. This was reflected, among other things, in the introduction of regulatory barriers to the development of onshore wind energy, the inadequate use of funds from the ETS, the lack of real measures to decarbonise industry and the heating sector and the lack of ambitious plans and measures to move away from coal. Although various political forces in Poland emphasised that nuclear energy would be an important element in the process of decarbonisation, the actual efforts to build nuclear power plants in Poland until the 2020s were more symbolic in nature.

The political change in Poland in 2023 brought a fundamental shift in the approach of the authorities, but it is still too early to speak of a real determination to accelerate the energy transition.

On the one hand, the new government, which came to power in 2023, has announced more ambitious targets for the energy transition, as shown by the latest version of the National Energy and Climate Plan (July 2025), which aims to increase the share of RES in electricity generation in Poland to almost 52% in 2030 and 80% in 2040. The connection of new RES sources is to be made possible by, among other things, the largest investments in the expansion of the electricity grids in Poland's history. Polish energy companies are carrying out projects with foreign partners to build large wind farms in the Baltic Sea. In addition, Poland wants to reduce emissions not only in the electricity sector but also in industry by building large and small nuclear power plants.

On the other hand, however, energy and climate issues are scattered throughout the government and divided between several ministries and offices, which continues to hinder effective coordination of activities. The new government continues its policy of freezing energy prices with minor adjustments and avoids introducing more systemic solutions for fear of social unrest and opposition from right-wing political forces, which have made criticism of the European Green Deal one of the main elements of their election programmes during recent election campaigns in Poland (in the 2024 EP elections or 2025 presidential elections). Moreover, the defeat of the candidate of the ruling camp in the presidential elections will make it difficult to introduce more ambitious solutions for the energy transition. The new president Karol Nawrocki has openly spoken out against the European Green Deal and in favour of maintaining the role of coal in the energy sector. One of his first decisions since taking office in August 2025 was to veto a bill that liberalised the rules for the construction of onshore wind farms in Poland.

The energy transition, i.e. the accelerated transition away from fossil fuels in Poland's energy sector, should become part of a cross-party consensus. Firstly, accelerating the energy transition will strengthen Poland's energy security in the long-term perspective. It will help reduce imports of oil and gas from abroad, which cause significant economic costs every year. Secondly, accelerating the transition will lead to a reduction in energy prices, which are currently an increasingly pressing social and economic problem.

However, in view of the domestic political tensions and the different approaches of the government and the opposition to the energy transition, achieving such a consensus could prove to be very difficult in the coming years.

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Poland's Energy Priorities and Recent Achievements

Expert article • 3867

Current stance

Poland's contemporary energy policy has been primarily shaped by the strive to reduce and ultimately eliminate its dependence on Russian fossil fuel imports. This strategy was fully implemented following the Russian Federation's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Since then, Poland managed to terminate its imports of Russian gas, oil and coal, replacing them with diversified supplies such as Norwegian gas delivered through the Baltic Pipe (completed in 2022), liquefied natural gas (LNG) from the United States, Qatar, and other suppliers. Additional inflows were enabled by interconnectors with Lithuania and other neighboring states.

Despite diversification from Russia achievements, highly polluting coal remains the dominant fuel in Poland's energy mix, particularly in electricity generation and district heating. In 2022, coal accounted for approximately 70% of electricity production, though this share had decreased to 57% by 2024. Current policy frameworks envisage the gradual phase-out of coal by 2049, with natural gas serving as a transitional fuel, especially in combined heat and power plants where renewable alternatives are limited.

As for the future, Poland's energy transition rests on three interlinked priorities. First, energy security, guaranteed by further diversification of supply routes and establishment of the capacity mechanisms necessary to maintain system's stability. Second, transition to the green energy, led by the deployment of offshore wind, large-scale photovoltaics, and the exploration of small modular reactors (SMRs). Third, energy affordability, through instruments such as regulated retail prices, subsidies for vulnerable consumers, and the gradual introduction of dynamic pricing markets.

Role of the new President

In recent years Polish government launched important support schemes for energy storage, introduced new subsidy mechanisms (e.g. contracts-for-difference auctions) for offshore wind, and secured EU backing for reforms of the district heating sector. It has also notified the European Commission of state aid for its first nuclear power plant, to be built on the Baltic coast by 2040.

However, Poland's political scene has become a source of competing visions for the future. The newly elected president, recently vetoed legislation that would have relaxed restrictions on building onshore wind farms. He has instead championed energy sovereignty built on nuclear power and continued use of fossil fuels, criticizing the EU's climate policy as harmful to Polish households and workers. The government, in contrast, is pressing ahead with measures to expand renewables and attract investment. This tension between president and parliament could shape the pace of Poland's energy transition in the years ahead.

Achievements during the EU Presidency

In 2025 Poland assumed the rotating presidency of the Council of the European Union, placing it at the center of continental debates on climate and energy policy. The timing was crucial, coinciding with negotiations on the EU's 2040 climate target, the Clean Industrial Deal, and the next EU budget.

Energy security was a top priority for Warsaw, and the presidency delivered notable achievements. The European Commission, with Polish backing, adopted the RePowerEU Roadmap, which sets a clear timetable for eliminating all Russian fossil fuel imports by 2027. The presidency also brokered an agreement to extend EU gas storage rules until 2027, maintaining the requirement that facilities be filled to 90% ahead of winter while allowing flexibility to avoid price spikes.

Equally significant was the adoption of the Action Plan for Affordable Energy, a package of measures intended to lower energy costs for households and businesses. On Poland's initiative, EU leaders also agreed to increase free emission allowances for the district heating sector by 30 percent—an important concession for Warsaw, given its heavy reliance on coal-fired heat.

Importance for the Baltic region

Highly important achievement that would not be possible without contribution of Poland and its grid was the completion of synchronization between the Baltic States and Continental European Network. Completed in February 2025 synchronization enabled Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia to disconnect from the Russian led BRELL system once and for all. The project, backed by €1.6 billion in EU funds, required extensive upgrades in Poland ant the Baltic States: hundreds of kilometers of new transmission lines, substations, and synchronous compensators were built or modernized. The achievement marked the end of a dependency that had lasted for more than six decades, during which the Baltic States' frequency control was managed by Russia.

Poland's role in the region goes beyond synchronization. Offshore wind farms in the Baltic Sea—such as Baltic Power, now under construction—are poised to supply millions of households. Interconnectors with Lithuania and future links to Germany will further weave the Baltics into the European market. Finally, Poland due to its geography, experience and market size is crucial for the Baltic hydrogen strategy. Significant Polish political leverage makes neighboring states hope that the EU funding will be secured and ambitions of reaching wider European hydrogen markets one day will come truth.

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Two nuclear power plants might not be enough

Expert article • 3868

As stated in the *Polish Nuclear Energy Program*, part of Poland's energy transition policy involves building two nuclear power plants. The first will be located near the seashore in Lubiatowo-Kopalino. The second is planned in central Poland, though the exact location has not yet been decided. However, it is certain that the pre-selected sites are all in the proximity to existing coal-fired power plants that are going to be shut down. This provides several advantages, including access to the existing power grid and a skilled workforce that will be available locally for construction and maintenance.

Assuming an 85% capacity factor, two nuclear power plants could generate between 44 and 67 TWh annually. This would cover around 26–39% of Poland's present electricity demand (approximately 170 TWh). However, demand is expected to grow in the upcoming decades. According to the Polish Transmission System Operator, electricity demand is expected to rise to 215–231 TWh by 2040. A less conservative forecast by McKinsey suggests demand could increase by up to 60%, reaching 250–273 TWh in 2040 and potentially doubling by 2050 (330–363 TWh). These differences largely stem from varying assumptions about electrification of transport, heating, and industry. For example, full electrification of the Polish metallurgy sector could increase its electricity demand from about 6 TWh today to 30–32 TWh.

In advanced electrification scenarios, the share of demand met by two nuclear power plants would fall to just 12–20%. This implies that over 80% of electricity would have to come from renewable sources. Poland's geography is unsuitable for large-scale hydropower, leaving mainly three options: biogas (including biomethane), wind, and solar. However, the latter two are non-dispatchable and require balancing. This could be problematic, as Poland—like Germany—experiences *Dunkelflaute* conditions, when for 7–10 days in a row both wind and solar capacity factors drop below 20%. This means that once renewable penetration exceeds 40–50%, alternative cost indicators such as *System LCOE or Levelized Full System Costs of Electricity* show a steep rise in overall system costs.

One possible solution could be small modular reactors (SMRs). The public–private conglomerate Orlen Synthos Green Energy plans to begin construction of the first BWRX reactor in 2028. The company already has at least six potential SMR locations with Decisions in Principle issued, which could provide up to 1800 MW of additional capacity. However, uncertainties remain around the final cost of SMRs and whether first-of-a-kind deployment issues could make them less attractive for industry.

This is why Poland should begin working on a third nuclear power plant after 2028, when the first "nuclear concrete" is poured at Lubiatowo-Kopalino. Experience gained by both Polish authorities in planning and construction, as well as by general contractors with technologies such as AP1000, EPR, or CANDU, should help reduce costs compared to the first plant. Further savings would be possible if the third plant, like the second, were located on a coal plant site, benefiting from existing infrastructure and supporting local communities during the transition. A third power plant can also benefit from the growing share of local companies acquiring the necessary experience and certifications during earlier projects.

Poland's cautious but ambitious nuclear policy is understandable. The country is one of the few in the region without an operating nuclear plant, and the last attempt—at Żarnowiec in the 1980s and 1990s—was abandoned during construction. However, since restarting its nuclear program a few years ago, Poland has made steady progress, and public support is among the highest in the world (92.5% acceptance according to a Ministry of Industry poll in November 2024). This provides a strong foundation for expanding nuclear capacity in Poland's future energy mix.

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Polish equality policy: a continued disappointment

Expert article • 3869

The 2023 Polish parliamentary elections were marked by unprecedented mobilization efforts centered on pro-democracy and pro-equality agendas. While the opposition did not achieve a total victory, significant gains were made in parliamentary seats, reflecting a growing public disaffection with previous ultraconservative policies. The elections were perceived as a potential turning point for advancing equality, not least because these issues were included in the electoral programs of the winning anti-Law and Justice (PiS) coalition. However, the post-election period revealed a significant gap between expectations and reality, leading to widespread disappointment and disillusionment in particular amongst the more progressive electorate.

The hopes of the 2023 elections

The eight years of PiS governments (2015-23) were characterized by increasing centralization of power by the ruling party, alongside an ultra-conservative state capture and controversial legal reforms and ultra-restrictive reproductive policies. The 2023 parliamentary elections proved a post-1989 record in terms of voter turnout (over 74%). The erosion of democratic norms in Poland galvanized various stakeholders, including established political parties, non-governmental organizations, and nascent grassroots movements. Opposition parties—most notably the Civic Coalition, The Left, and Poland 2050—formed strategic alliances to consolidate the anti-PiS vote. Arguably, voters expressed anger and frustration mainly because of economic inflation and high prices, the perceived arrogance of the authorities, and the disregard for women's rights. They voted against PiS also as a protest against the ruling party's encroachment on civic freedoms, their imposition of an ultraconservative way of life, and a perceived interference in privacy. The mobilizing factors also included a sense of community among those wishing to change the government, as evidenced by the marches organized by the Civic Coalition and the queues at polling stations.

Reproductive rights emerged as a flashpoint within the broader struggle for civil liberties. The Constitutional Tribunal's 2020 ruling, which virtually banned abortion and spurred mass protests under the banner of the Women's Strike had evolved into a potent symbol of resistance against governmental overreach, rallying women, youth, and marginalized groups. The participation of women in the 2023 elections was notably robust, driven by increasing advocacy for gender equality and representation in political processes. Women's rights organizations launched extensive campaigns to emphasize the importance of female participation in shaping policy and leadership. Issues such as reproductive rights, gender pay equity, and social welfare were at the forefront of political discourse, galvanizing women to express their preferences. The Batory Foundation conducted focus groups with women post-election. The participants expressed sharp criticism towards PiS, believing that the ruling party treated them like objects and second-class citizens. They felt that they were being denied the fundamental right to make decisions about themselves, especially in situations where their health or life is at risk. The abortion ban introduced by the Constitutional Tribunal, which was unequivocally perceived as an organ under the control of PiS, has significantly violated both the sense of security and personal freedom of women.

...and the disappointment in the inertia of the Tusk governments post-2023

In the runup to the 2023 elections, there was a discernible shift in the political rhetoric surrounding gender equality in Poland. Then the newly elected government, comprising a coalition of center-right and center-left parties, expressed a commitment to promoting gender equality and women's rights. The Tusk government included a Minister for Equality (for the first time in Polish politics). And yet the legislative efforts initiated to address especially sexual and reproductive health and rights, care work, and LGBTQ+ rights have been stalling in the nearly two years since. Legislative and policy advancements have been minimal, with essential reforms in areas such as the access to abortion (or even its decriminalization), sexual education and obstetric violence protections remaining largely stagnant. The political sphere continues to be dominated by parties and leaders who espouse traditionalist notions of gender roles, resulting in a disheartening lack of progress. This scenario has fostered a sense of disillusionment among those who expected a post-election shift toward more inclusive and egalitarian policies.

Similarly, the expectations for progress in LGBTQ+ rights in Poland have not materialized as many had hoped post-2023. The political discourse remains largely influenced by ultraconservative rhetoric, with limited legislative advances that fail to ensure the basic human rights and dignities of LGBTQ+ individuals. Efforts to secure anti-discrimination laws and civil unions encountered resistance within the ruling coalition, often being met with apathy or outright governmental opposition. This has perpetuated a climate of marginalization and societal prejudice against LGBTQ+ communities, deepening the disappointment felt by both local and international observers who anticipated a more progressive stance. The attempts to establish legal recognition for same-sex partnerships have repeatedly been blocked, leaving Poland as one of the few countries in the European Union without any such provisions.

This disconnection between the 2023 electoral promises and political reality has fostered skepticism regarding the commitment of political leaders to these critical issues. Of course the palpable public frustration was not solely due to the lack of progress in equality policy, but also a wider perception of complete government inertia. The result has been a significant 'protest' and anti-government vote in the 2025 presidential elections, in which the cumulative vote for the right and far right candidates amounted to 50%.

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From the past to the future

Expert article • 3870

Is there a coherent identity among the medium-sized cities located across the Baltic Sea region? They form a mosaic of nations, languages, with hybrid identities memories shaped by centuries of trade, migration, and shifting borders. What truly binds these cities is a set of values derived from the solidarity of modern Europe: openness to multiple perspectives, a legacy of civic egalitarianism, and a blend of self-governance, entrepreneurship, technical ingenuity and commercial ethics founded on trust, reputation and respect. The pragmatism of the urban middle class enduring ethos of work, autonomy and civic responsibility has shaped the city of Szczecin.

Cities reflect human enterprise, and museum collections reflect that labour, passion, wealth, and creativity. For Baltic cities undergoing industrial transformations, economic metamorphoses, and social revitalizations – often linked to lost industrial potential based on waterways – cultural heritage can serve as infrastructure for the future. Medium-sized cities striving to be smart, sustainable, and innovative often invest in starchitecture to articulate and reinforce their identity. The foundation of a territorial brand lies in legitimizing its own narrative – a founding myth, once chronicled in legends, today expressed through storytelling. No one can steal a community's legends or aspirations. By investing in museums, a city invests in its narrative, a source of local pride, belonging, and social cohesion. Cities that adopt cultural heritage as a pillar of development gain a competitive advantage grounded in trust, shared values, a multigenerational brand, uniqueness, as well as civic engagement, care, rootedness, stability.

The value of cultural heritage, if properly preserved and actively maintained, increases over time – both economically and culturally. This growth, however, depends on continuous investment, sustained public engagement and social responsible, effective management. Cultural heritage is a cumulative value: it cannot be consumed, reproduced, or manufactured, but it can be cultivated – or lost – in a symbolic sense. This heritage represents the archetype of circularity and stands as the very quintessence of circular economy, where value is preserved, regenerated, transmitted rather than extracted and depleted.

Szczecin provides a compelling example. In the early 20th century, wealthy entrepreneurs established a unique architectural complex crowned by a monumental museum at its centre – today the National Museum in Szczecin. In the 21st century, a community seeking its identity – a true cultural melting pot, bringing personal memorabilia and shared memories – contributed to the realization of the Dialogue Centre 'Upheavals', a department of the National Museum in Szczecin. This underground pavilion located near the Philharmonic Hall – both buildings internationally recognized and recipients of numerous awards for their architectural excellence, demonstrates the impact of innovative starchitecture and its contribution to the urban landscape.

Museums, once costly extravagances of the bourgeoisie, have today become profound expressions of social responsibility and instruments for building urban identity, myth, and legend – a symbolic map of the city as well as a form of economic storytelling. Museums are repositories of past innovation and achievements of civilization, resources of knowledge, experience and values that, if wisely managed, will inspire future generations. A museum collection is neither raw material nor traditional capital, but a unique symbolic asset.

Museums implement innovations that often influence broader public services, enhancing the reception of change. Research conducted on the determinants of innovation processes in Poland's national museums has shown that these institutions possess substantial innovative potential. Between 2011 and 2020, the studied museums conducted approximately 150 innovation processes, implementing over 50 different innovations. The simplest were imitative, sometimes even superficial, but 30% were creative innovations based on advanced research and even discoveries. Advanced technologies enable museums to mediate encounters with the past, allowing visitors to analyse historical events, decisions, and discoveries from the present perspective. A museum serves as a repository of potential, discarded and realized scenarios. No other place allows such a comprehensive understanding of the consequences of commercial, geopolitical, municipal, or social decisions.

Museums have a city-creative function – they integrate public space, strengthen identity, and enhance tourist appeal. They are places where people experience pride, nostalgia, curiosity, and even shame. Museums foster resilience, which supports creativity, risk-taking, and investment in the future. They teach innovation and entrepreneurship through audience participation in reconstructions of both the earliest and subsequent historical solutions to perennial human problems. Today, museums serve as centres of social innovation, participatory projects, and education, which in turn strengthen and accelerate their own development. Investing in museum is therefore not only investing in identity and memory, but also in collective intelligence.

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