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How Poland can lead European defence integration: Lessons from Polish history

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Abstract

The EU's expansion to include countries in Eastern Europe formerly under Soviet domination brought the geopolitics of dealing with Russian expansionism firmly into EU institutions. Because of its size and geographical location, Poland is crucial to the EU's self-defence against Russia. Yet, Poland is divided between a government that would strengthen those institutions and a president who would repeat the errors of Poland's past foreign policy in the 1930s, when it alienated allies. In an echo of the seventeenth century's debilitating *liberum veto*, such a policy would also preserve European weakness by insisting on unanimity in European security policy, allowing it to be paralysed by pro-Kremlin veto players such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary. But if Poland overcomes this historical legacy, it will be in a prime position to lead Europe's security and defence integration. The upcoming accession process involving Ukraine and Moldova would allow the changes needed to eliminate the *Hungaricum veto* in the spirit of what Mario Draghi has described as 'pragmatic federalism'.

Keywords

Poland, Defence, EU, European defence, Polish history (inter-war), Polish politics, EU enlargement

Introduction

European integration was initiated to solve once and for all the problem that in a Europe of nation-states there were, in the British historian A. J. P. Taylor's words, simply 'too

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many Germans' (Taylor 1969). Taylor's remark was made in reference to the balance of power and was only part of the truth. The other half of this thought is that, rather than there being too many Germans, there were not enough of them. The German peoples were numerous enough, if unified, to constitute the largest nation-state in Western and Central Europe by some margin, but not numerous enough to dominate the continent. They were strong enough to inspire fear, but weak enough to be defeated when even only some of the other powers ganged up on them.[1]

This instability stems from the nationalist principle that every state must correspond to a single nation and that states should be arranged as far as possible to reflect their population's national allegiance. It thus became of huge importance whether, for instance, Alsatians were governed by France or Germany. In one nation-state they would be citizens and enjoy the attendant privileges and obligations; in the other, even if they had the formal rights of citizenship, they would find themselves one or two rungs down the ladder and at risk of having even that lower status taken away should a more stridently nationalist government come into power. This risk promotes fear and causes people to cluster into national groups to protect themselves.

Post-war European integration addressed this risk by reducing the importance of national affiliation. This was the genius of Monnet's method. Whereas nationalism raised the stakes, so that it mattered hugely whether someone (or the coal and steel that was produced) was German, French, Czech or Polish, the development of European institutions reduced the importance of nationality.

Monnet's highly effective method was extended with considerable success as far as the region on the Polish–Lithuanian border, territories once part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which significant minorities live on the 'wrong' side. Despite grandstanding by nationalist demagogues such as Călin Georgescu or Viktor Orbán, integration into the EU has so far been rather more successful in preserving peace and minority rights than were the minority treaties and plebiscites used after the First World War. But it ran into its limits when faced with what one former KGB officer would come to call '"the greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century' (*BBC News* 2005), the collapse of the Soviet Union and its empire of captive nations in Eastern Europe.

That officer was Vladimir Putin, who since becoming president of Russia has decided to do what he can to reverse that collapse, thus posing a second problem for European nations. This 'Russian problem', which had previously just been a matter of foreign policy, was brought into the European institutions as a result of the integration of the formerly captive nations. The targets of Russian revanchism were now EU member states, integrating economically and politically with the West.

The change was disguised by two factors: the US's role in preserving security in Europe, and the willing suspension of disbelief about Putin's intentions, through which much of Europe's leadership allowed itself to be hoodwinked. US hegemony allowed Europe not only to skimp on defence spending, but also to avoid dealing with the fact

that it had become a polity, parts of which Russia plotted to reassert control over. The countries that joined the EU in 2004, and after 2008, Romania and Bulgaria, converged and integrated economically. Yet, the geopolitical implications would not begin to be absorbed until 2022, despite a growing awareness of Russian interference and information manipulation, which was reflected in the European External Action Service's setting up of units such as East StratCom.

The suspension of disbelief ensured that the concerns of Eastern Europe were not taken seriously. Despite the cyber-attack on Estonia, the invasion of Georgia, the seizure of Crimea and continual subversion, including the funding of extreme-right-wing political parties, Western European leaders failed to prepare for the Russian threat to EU member states—and to the EU's integrity. Defence budgets remained small, and few countries, Lithuania being one of the exceptions, took measures to limit the influence of Russian money in politics.

This is not to argue that Russia's path to a revanchist autocracy was predetermined. There were a number of occasions when things could have gone differently. Mikhail Khodorkovsky could have avoided imprisonment and mounted a challenge to Putin in 2003. The protest movement at Bolotnaya, led by Boris Nemstov, might have forced changes in the regime, and Alexei Navalny's anti-corruption efforts might also have obtained concessions. Instead, Putin consolidated his power, Navalny and Nemstov have been murdered, and Khodorkovsky is in exile. As long as Putin stays in power, confrontation with the EU is to be expected.

'Divide et revanche'

'Revanchism' was the term coined to describe the French policy towards Germany following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian war. *Révanche*[2] meant obtaining the return of the territories lost by Napoleon III, including Alsace-Lorraine, by force if necessary.

In the revanchist view, France's defeat had been the result of institutional weakness during the decadent Second Empire; but the stronger Third Republic would be able to overcome German power and restore the territories to their 'rightful' owners. Putin's conception of Russia is not dissimilar. Due to the weakness of the declining Soviet Union, and of the Yeltsin regime that followed it, Moscow was forced to cede power and influence to the West. Now that Putin has restored the Russian state to an institution capable of wielding power, he has sought to use this power. He has not kept his ambitions secret. At the Munich Security Conference he asserted that 'NATO expansion . . . represents a serious provocation' (Putin 2007).

We might say that Putin considers himself provoked, but that would be to accept the self-serving assertion of this most unreliable of narrators. There is indeed a conflict going on, not between an 'expanding' NATO and the Russian sphere of influence, but between the re-establishment of Moscow's power over countries that have broken free from it and

those countries' desire to live in freedom, where they can make their own decisions about alliances and international cooperation.

Russia's chief modus operandi is to divide and subvert. The country is bigger and stronger than any single member state, and its autocratic system allows it to devote portions of its budget to interference in the affairs of its neighbours that a democratic system would allocate to public services for the benefit of its own people instead of harming foreigners.

Russia's tactic is to use corruption and subversion (including terrorist attacks, vote buying and financial support for anti-democratic political parties) to divide European countries and be able to pick off individual countries too militarily weak to resist Russia on its own, one by one. This strategy was most recently illustrated during the debates about seizing frozen Russian assets and using them to support Ukraine's war effort. The answer to this 'divide-and-rule' strategy is solidarity, and Poland must be its linchpin.

Polish linchpin

Poland is crucial because of its size and location. It is by some distance the largest EU member state in the region, with almost 40 million people, 312 km^2 of land area and currently a GDP of €850 billion (around $1 trillion at market exchange rates; $1.35 trillion at purchasing power parity) (European Union n.d.).

Although European structures and international alliances reduce the importance of nation-states for aggregating power, acquiring resources and commanding troops—the elements required to secure legitimacy—they have far from eliminated it. National politics and national militaries remain indispensable. National defence ministries and national personnel need to be mobilised. Poland has the greatest capacity of all the 2004 and 2008 accession states. Its defence budget accounts for 60% of the total spending of the front-line EU member states from Finland to Bulgaria (European Defence Agency 2024).

The second reason for Poland's strategic importance is geographic. The Russian border with Europe stretches from Svalbard in the Atlantic down to Varna on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. Poland is in the middle of this front, directly bordering Russia's satellite state, Belarus, and surrounding the Kaliningrad enclave. It is through Poland that Finland and the Baltic are connected to Ukraine and Romania. Without a strong and engaged Poland, the successful defence of Europe's eastern flank would be extremely difficult.

However, Poland currently suffers from a foreign policy divided between the government, led by Donald Tusk's Civic Coalition (Koalicja Obywatelska), and the president, Karol Nawrocki (who is officially non-partisan but in practice is aligned with Poland's nationalist opposition, whose main components are currently Law and Justice (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość) and the radical Confederation Liberty and Independence (*Konfederacja Wolność i Niepodległość*).

Both sides maintain an anti-Russian position, but they differ in how it should be pursued. Tusk, together with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski, argues that Poland should strengthen its alliances with fellow EU members, the UK, NATO and like-minded partners across the world, including allies in the US Congress, and even suggests improving nuclear weapons cooperation with France. But Nawrocki has opted to rely on the support of Donald Trump.

Their differing responses to the Greenland crisis emphasise the point. Tusk joined European allies in their statement of support for Denmark and Greenland's territorial integrity, saying, 'Territorial integrity and sovereignty are fundamental principles of international law . . . The EU stands in full solidarity with Denmark and the people of Greenland' (European Council 2026). Nawrocki, on the other hand, presented the issue as a bilateral tussle between Denmark and Trump as though Poland and Denmark were not themselves military allies in NATO and political associates as members of the EU. 'Discussion', Nawrocki argued, 'should remain a matter between the prime minister of Denmark and President Trump' (*Notes From Poland* 2026). Nawrocki himself has played up his relationship with Trump, who invited him to the White House when he was only a presidential candidate, but who did not invite the Polish prime minister to Washington when he held discussions with other European leaders following JD Vance's attack on Zelenskyy in 2025. In 2026, after the publication of a new US National Security Strategy that blames 'activities of the European Union' for European decline so severe it risks the 'stark prospect of civilizational erasure' (US 2025, 25), Nawrocki continued to insist that 'Donald Trump is the only leader who can solve this [the Russian threat,] and we have to support him in this process' (*Notes From Poland* 2026). He has combined adherence to Trump with attacks on Poland's neighbours, Germany (insisting that Poland was '"ready to defend the western border" with Germany' (*Notes From Poland* 2025)) and Ukraine. Though Nawrocki did eventually agree to host Zelenskyy in Warsaw, he preceded the visit with a demand that Ukraine 'stop taking Poland for granted' (Mularczyk 2025). Nawrocki has yet to visit Kyiv.

This attitude is in some way redolent of inter-war Polish foreign minister Jozef Beck's attempt to arrange the smaller European powers into a 'Third Europe' to balance the axis, while simultaneously taking part in the German-led dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. (Essen 2020). Indeed, one might go further and note that, like Nawrocki, Beck placed his hopes for Poland's security in a self-aggrandising authoritarian to the west of Poland. As late as 1938, Beck, it was reported by Poland's ambassador to Romania, was 'trusting' of the Nazi leader (Gawronski 1965, 480).

With elements of the Trump administration promising a policy of 'cultivating resistance to Europe's current trajectory within European nations' while seeking to 'reestablish . . . strategic stability with Russia' (US 2025, 27), such trust in an authoritarian strongman appears similarly naive. Though the Trump administration is unlikely to invade Poland itself, the extent of its collusion with Moscow is rather more apparent than Friedrichstrasse's was in the late 1930s, and this time, Europe in general, rather than just Poland, is in the sights of this Trump–Russia condominium.

Hungaricum veto

If invading EU territory is currently beyond Russia's ambitions, weakening it by supporting nationalist extremists is a goal the Trump administration shares with Moscow. Pro-Russian and Pro-Trump leaders wield vetoes on European foreign policy: most recently, Viktor Orbán and Andrej Babiš refused to adopt the joint statement on Greenland. Other member states that appear intimidated by Russia, such as Belgium, blocked the seizure of frozen Russian assets to support the Ukrainian war effort. These leaders also slow down decision-making; they exercise a veto over European policy and weaken the EU significantly.

In this situation it is difficult not to see parallels with the evolution of the use of the *liberum veto* in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, away from a device designed to seek consensus and towards an absolute veto that could prevent decisions being made at all. Norman Davies describes the *veto*'s initial conception in the sixteenth century as follows:

> Such was the strength of feeling about the need for unanimity, that it was considered quite improper to continue when a single voice was raised with the words *Veto* (I deny), or *Nie pozwalam* (I do not allow it). . . . At this point, the Marshal would call a break in the debate, and inquire more closely as to what the objections were. If a simple misunderstanding was involved, or a call for clarification, the debate would resume quite quickly. If something more serious had arisen, the break might last for several hours or even days, with the Marshal working hard in the corridors to repair the conflict. (Davies 2005, 264)

One wonders whether Article 31(2) of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) drew inspiration from it:

> If a member of the Council declares that, for vital and stated reasons of national policy, it intends to oppose the adoption of a decision to be taken by qualified majority, a vote shall not be taken. The High Representative will, in close consultation with the Member State involved, search for a solution acceptable to it. If he does not succeed, the Council may, acting by a qualified majority, request that the matter be referred to the European Council for a decision by unanimity.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, foreign powers exploited this feature of the Polish constitutional system to paralyse the Commonwealth and, eventually, weaken it so much that neighbouring powers could partition it. Currently, this *Hungaricum veto* is paralysing European foreign policy just when unity is needed to resist joint Trump–Moscow pressure and to show supporters of the transatlantic alliance in the US Congress that Europe will uphold its side of the bargain.

Speedy decision-making is particularly important in international crises. This is qualitatively different from ordinary 'horse trading' in the European Council, where countries can exchange concessions in different policy areas with reasonable confidence that a concession in one area will be balanced by a reward in another, even if it occurs a few

months later. The stakes of international crises change the bargaining dynamics fundamentally. When unity of action is paramount, even a single hold-out, such as Viktor Orbán's Hungary, is able to extort concessions from the remaining 26 EU member states. When the hold-out in question opposes the other members because of its pro-Kremlin strategic orientation, the incentives for it to agree on the consensus become even weaker.

Reforming the process is, however, exceptionally difficult. While procedures, including the general *passerelle* clause (art. 48(7) TEU), allow the Council to move from unanimity to qualified majority voting by a simple, albeit unanimous, decision, actions having 'military or defence implications' are explicitly and repeatedly excluded (arts 31(4) and 48(7) TEU; 333(3) Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union). And insofar as changing the defence policy process is interpreted as 'increasing the competences' of the EU, it may not be reformed using the simplified revision procedure (art. 48(6) TEU).

There is, however, a way out of the impasse: accession negotiations also allow amendments to the treaties to be adopted: 'The conditions of admission and the adjustments to the Treaties on which the Union is founded, which such admission entails, shall be the subject of an agreement between the Member States and the applicant State' (art. 49 TEU).

The admission of countries under military threat from Russia, notably Ukraine and Moldova, should reasonably be expected to include adjustments to the treaties to ensure effective implementation of Article 42(7), the EU's mutual defence clause, which stipulates: 'If a Member State is the victim of armed aggression on its territory, the other Member States shall have towards it *an obligation of aid and assistance by all the means in their power*' (italics added).

This provides a way out of the trap posed by the *Hungaricum veto*, and Poland should be in a position to take it. Though such treaty changes still require unanimity, the unanimity that is needed is no greater than that required to admit Ukraine or Moldova in the first place.

Conclusions

Longer-term changes in the US strategic posture, together with anti-European hostility from the Trump administration itself, have stimulated much-needed new thinking on how the EU can protect itself—both current members and accession states—from Russian aggression. Significant progress has been made, in particular, on procurement and research and development, now being led by Defence and Space Commissioner Andrius Kubilius. This has all been possible within existing EU structures.

Nevertheless, pressure from the Trump administration, with its apparent desire to ally itself with Moscow, increases the need for radical thinking. One approach is based on the hope of buying Trump off through flattery and transactional deals. This is the method adopted by President Nawrocki of Poland. But it is likely to fail, just as inter-war Polish foreign minister Josef Beck's reliance on a good relationship with Hitler failed.

Instead, as the largest and most militarily capable of the states admitted since 2004 and also the largest member state under direct Russian threat, Poland needs to take the lead in integrating European security and defence policy further. Part of this action should involve a deeper engagement with initiatives for a European Security Council, formats such as the E6, expanded discussions on nuclear cooperation with France and, if possible, deeper cooperation with the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force. But Poland's leadership is also crucial within the EU.

The upcoming accession process for Ukraine and Moldova provides Poland with the opportunity to lead with carefully crafted and specific changes to the treaties to permanently strengthen the EU's role in defending Europe's eastern flank. These amendments would equip the Union with the speed of decision-making needed to ensure that all of the EU's resources can be deployed to resist Russian expansionism.

This could work in parallel to the initiatives labelled 'European Security Council', an early version of which was proposed some years ago (Nováky 2020) and subsequent versions of which have been proposed by President Macron and Commissioner Kubilius (Kubilius 2026), and also this year at the Wilfried Martens Centre for European Studies (Ciolan 2026). Indeed, such initiatives could perhaps be considered versions of the 'pragmatic federalism' Mario Draghi (2026) has recently called for.

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Notes

1. Of course, in reality, many people, particularly those living in cities or near borders, spoke multiple languages and felt themselves members of various cultures. The obligation to choose one was a nationalist invention, with tragic consequences for Europe.
2. 'Revanche' is often literally translated as revenge, but the connotation is slightly different, suggesting getting even but also recovery, as well as simply punishing one's enemy.

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