

## A New Challenger in European Politics: Rethinking Poland's International Relations Agenda

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### Abstract

Poland has become a prominent actor in European and transatlantic politics, security, and international relations, especially in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The country's controversial position after the end of the Cold War has long been on the agenda of international actors and states. It has been the biggest Central and Eastern European country to try and to succeed in being a strong, assertive ally in Euro-Atlantic structures as a westernized country. However, it is not difficult to say that this more than 30-year process includes different priorities in foreign policy. From this point of view, the Poland of the 1990s and the Poland of the "post EU-accession period" differ from each other in terms of foreign policy discourse, agenda, and implications. In this paper, I will try to analyze the current focuses of Poland's foreign policy agenda in general, considering its position in the European Union and transatlantic security structures. In addition, I will discuss how the international and domestic determinants of Polish foreign policy have evolved with a holistic approach. Emphasizing the developments and dynamics of recent years, this paper also tries to answer the question of why there is a need to prepare a special journal issue on Polish foreign policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Poland now has a different agenda in terms of its international relations (compared to the pre-EU accession process), it is worth discussing and analyzing the breaking points, new tendencies, and current dynamics of Polish foreign policy with numerous distinguished articles in this special issue.

### Keywords

Poland, Polish Foreign Policy, Polish Security Policy, Euroscepticism

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**To cite this article:** Erler Bayır, O. (2022). A New Challenger in European Politics: Rethinking Poland's International Relations Agenda. *SİYASAL: Journal of Political Sciences*, 31(Suppl. 1), S1–S10. <http://doi.org/10.26650/siyasal.2022.31.1028141>

## Introduction

After the Cold War, Poland's two-way policy initiatives and priorities were observed in parallel with transformations in the international system. On the one hand, economic development, liberalization priorities, policies of integration with the West and membership in the European Union (EU) were on Poland's agenda. On the other hand, security policies, tendencies toward Atlanticism, cooperation with the United States (US), and NATO membership, which was one of the most important foreign policy goals, were at the forefront. Considering Poland's foreign policy preferences and practices within this context, Poland has been one of the most remarkable countries in the Central and Eastern Europe region to recently have been integrated into the EU.

Considering the historical dimension of Poland's foreign policy, it can clearly be seen that the perception of threat from both the east and west is one of the most important factors to determine its foreign policy. Historically, although there was the perception of a threat from Germany until the end of the Cold War, Poland tried to overcome this issue through EU membership. However, the threat from and fear of Russia continued to exist. It has also been observed that Poland is close to the EU in economic issues and to the US and NATO in political and security issues. This strategy has led to a dilemma in important foreign policy issues during the last 30 years. It can be seen that Atlanticism generally prevails in this dilemma. Atlanticist tendencies are widespread compared to Europeanism in matters related to foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. This is due to Poland's geopolitical position and to historical reasons: Germany and Russia, two great powers to the east and west, put Poland under pressure. Hence, Poland does not trust them, and looks for a solution in its relationship with the US, which is a distant power. It can be seen that the Atlanticist tendency is prevailing in Poland, even after accession to the EU in 2004 and even though steps were taken to deepen integration with the EU. Events that occurred during the development of the Common Security and Defense Policy and the process of creating the EU Constitution, and particularly Poland's attitude in these situations, proves this. In these matters, Poland did not want to compromise, not only for the sake of its national interests but also for the sake of its social structure. There have been situations and periods in Poland when the concern for "ensuring security" outweighed "cooperation for integration." After the EU accession period in 2004, Europeanists hoped that this situation would change a little. However, the conservative wing that dominated Polish internal politics between 2004 and 2007 already had a skeptical view of Europe. It is difficult to say that this group internalized Europeanism or have importance to it in their politics. The Kaczyński brothers, who served as Prime Minister and President and came from the PiS party (*Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - Law and Justice Party*), had a predominantly Atlanticist approach to the issue of security and foreign policy. They had a non-European attitude, even in internal issues of European politics concerning the future of Europe. They did not hesitate to place importance on Polish national interests prior to EU integration. When it comes to security policy, it has been argued that Atlanticist tendencies coincide with Polish national interests (for instance, it was decided to continue keeping soldiers deployed in Iraq despite opposition from the public). In fact, after 2004, Poland has desired to be effective in taking strategic and significant decisions within the EU on international issues and also strengthening its position in this sense. However, they prefer to do this by taking active roles in matters of high politics in the international

system and supporting the US instead of doing it in harmony with powers within the EU with a European perspective. Although Poland is geographically located in Europe, they are on a path similar to the US in terms of politics and strategy. In this context, it can be said that Atlanticism in security issues has outweighed Europeanism in economic issues in Poland during the post-Cold War period. The liberal Tusk Government, which came into power in 2007, has declared that Europe is their priority in foreign policy. However, in practice, Europeanism has not been ahead of Atlanticism in every aspect. Nowadays, cooperation with the US has remained the basis of Polish security policy. On the other hand, it is difficult to say that all the Europeanist tendencies that support European security are completely independent from the US and NATO.

For instance, Europeanists in Poland believed that the country's support for the US in Iraq in 2003 jeopardized its position within the EU and the development of the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy. In addition, they claimed that Atlanticism did not bring any considerable benefit to Poland. However, it can be said that the pro-Europeans in Poland are not anti-American in their perspective. Even Donald Tusk, the leader of the PO (*Civic Platform*), who was in power from 2007-2014, acted cautiously during the decision-making process in order not to confront the US. His support for the US Missile Shield Project can be seen as a concrete example of this.

At this point, it should also be mentioned that Poland's aim is to consolidate its position both in the international system and in the region. Poland's decision to be an ally of the US is directly related with security issues in the post 9/11 international order, which led Poland to encounter not only new threats but also new opportunities. This resulted in being one of the first countries within NATO to support the US in the case of intervention in Afghanistan and UN peacemaking operations, and in the case of Iraq, supporting intervention even without the legitimacy of UN backing at the beginning. In Poland, Europeanists criticized Atlanticists due to their policies, stating that "Poland is becoming a satellite of the US." In return, Atlanticists defended themselves by claiming that "Poland is an ally of the US, not a satellite." However, there are also a considerable number of Poles who are skeptical about whether the US perceives Poland as a permanent ally or not.

The increasing impact of the US in Poland's security and foreign policy, particularly after the Iraq War in 2003, did not make the expected positive impact and material contribution to Poland. Also, this situation caused disappointment in society. When Polish entrepreneurs were excluded from the Iraqi reconstruction process and the US did not abolish visa requirements for Polish citizens (as well as arising dissatisfaction over the F-16 Off-set Agreement and absence of foreign trade advantages), this led to disappointment in the country regarding cooperation with the US. In addition, since the cooperation seems to be unilaterally beneficial for the US, there have been certain criticisms in Poland over buying F-16 aircraft from the American company Lockheed Martin.

After Poland gained its independence, Atlanticism and Europeanism were the two main trends in its foreign policy, especially in the 1990s and the first half of the 2000s. This can be observed in the membership processes for EU and NATO, as well as the foreign policy outputs that followed membership. Poland, as a new independent state on the international

stage, tried to ensure its security and achieve economic development through the two basic Western alliances: NATO and the EU. These tendencies have defined all of Poland's foreign policy processes and outcomes. Poland chooses to maintain parallel policies and seek cooperation with the US in international security issues. In addition, it considers NATO to be the main security actor in the world. However, Polish politics towards the EU are oriented predominantly toward economic motivations and goals. This difference causes a dilemma in Poland's foreign policy (Erler Bayır, 2011; Erler Bayır, 2013).

To sum up, soon after the collapse of the communist regime, the new democratic Polish state was confronted with the need to take its place in the modern world. Since the communist ideology had bankrupted them, a pro-liberal and pro-western stance was the only option for the Polish political elite and consecutive democratic governments at that time. That direction was also strongly desired; the famous slogan "Return to Europe" reveals both the longing for the country's position in modern international relations - so overshadowed in the communist period - and also the need and necessity as it was actually the only stable foreign policy tendency for Poland. Just after the end of the Cold War, the Republic of Poland was to secure its international position and stabilize domestic political and economic problems. The German-Polish Border Treaty of November 14, 1990 marked an important first step in this process, hence it settled the issue that was pending in the international law context since 1945. In the meantime, the reconstruction of democratic political institutions and the restructuring of the economy overlapped with setting new goals in the international environment, i.e., future NATO accession and European integration. The former was to be achieved in 1999, thus making Poland part of the transatlantic security network and providing the country with deep sense of military security. The 2004 EU accession successfully anchored the Polish state in the European family and in general, in the western political camp.

### **Polish Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

Almost twenty years after those proceedings, Polish foreign policy and its direction are to be further debated while international and domestic challenges pose new threats and opportunities. Russian aggression toward Ukraine and capture of the Crimea Peninsula once again raise questions about Poland's security. As a NATO member, Poland strongly emphasizes the necessity of a common security policy and a coherent attitude towards the Russian Federation. At the same time, country was and still is fully supportive of Ukraine's European aspirations and the further EU accession process. On the other hand, Poland's position within the EU is as questionable as ever. The rise of the populist Law and Justice Party and its several domestic proceedings (like critical reforms undermining the political independence of the judiciary, and limitation of human rights in the abortion issue) have led to Brussels – Warsaw tensions and a situation where, for the first time, cuts in and limits to European financial support are being considered, thus providing fertile ground for domestic populism and even the extreme "Pol-exit" vision. Almost simultaneously, the condition of Polish democracy became a point of attention for the new Biden administration. Poland's traditional partnership with the US, which had been bolstered – at least in theory – during the Trump years, has become for the first time replaced with distrust and tensions. The state apparatus, which is dominated by Law and

Justice Party members, has repeatedly delayed a concession for one of the biggest private television broadcasters in Poland, (TVN, part of American-owned Discovery Concern), which is very critical towards current and previous Law and Justice Party governments. Such an attitude has succeeded in undermining Poland's relations with the US, traditionally considered a cordial one since the end of the Cold War, when the U.S. became the main supporter of Poland's NATO accession and also EU membership. After the smooth relations of the Trump era, the new American administration seem to be skeptical about the quality of democracy in Poland and the TVN issue is an open threat to American business. Currently, Poland is a US ally within NATO and an important customer of the American arms industry, but bilateral relations have moved from cordiality to aloofness and Polish top politicians are no longer warmly welcomed in Washington.

When one adds damaged relations and a historical dispute with Israel, and tense relations with neighboring countries (mainly Germany and the Czech Republic), the overall picture of Polish foreign policy seems rather blurry as the country moves slightly towards international isolation.

Since 2015, Polish-Israeli relations have deteriorated as several conflicts have broken out between the two countries. The new rightist Law and Justice Party government imposed a series of measures and legal regulations that damaged bilateral relations. In 2018, a law was passed stating that Poland must not be associated with the Holocaust in any way and in 2021 the Polish parliament passed a law that will block claims by the descendants of Holocaust victims. Appeals against administrative decisions will no longer be allowed after 30 years, which will prevent or complicate new and ongoing restitution proceedings. These regulations largely contributed to a decline in the two states' relations and are also closely followed by the Biden administration, which was already lukewarm towards Poland, as mentioned above.

Tense relations with neighboring countries also draw attention. Traditional, harsh, right-wing anti-German rhetoric and Poland's justified accusations towards the Nord Stream 2 project made authorities in Berlin reserved towards Warsaw. In the interim, open conflict with the Czech Republic erupted: Prague has complained that the open-cast Turów mine has drained water from villages near the Polish border. In May 2021, the European Court of Justice ordered mine operations to "immediately cease" and later fined Poland €500,000 per day for ignoring the injunction. As of today, this problem has not been resolved, since Poland has not stopped the Turów power plant, arguing that it generates some 7% of the nation's energy and lights up millions of households.

All these issues and crises together are even more dangerous in the context of external threats like the current migration crisis at the Polish-Belarusian border and country's dependence on European funding. The former poses an open threat to country's security, as Belarusian dictator Alexander Lukashenko opened Belarusian borders and territory to thousands of migrants who currently are camping as they desperately and illegally try to cross the Polish border and get into the EU. Because they have not been allowed to enter Polish territory and have been pushed back by the Polish Border Guard, the overall situation has led to a humanitarian crisis right on Poland's doorstep. The possibility of European funding being limited by Brussels due to Poland's violation of EU treaties opens up questions about the country's future financial stability and further infrastructural

development. These kinds of developments in Polish foreign policy over the last decade have been reflected in recent publications on the subject. (See: Zieba, 2020; Batyk & Rzeczkowski, 2020; Burgonski, 2020; Polegkyi, 2021; Vorozheina, 2017; Zięba, 2019).

The above-mentioned factors should be a premise for further studies on Polish foreign policy – the nature of the changing world, shifts in the international environment, and domestic populism have an impact on the country's goals, at the same time seriously limiting its abilities to become an important regional player. This special issue emerged from the consensus that Poland is a considerable country in European politics, both as a challenger and an ambitious actor in world politics. Accordingly, this special issue is intended primarily for scholars in the field of International Relations who are interested in Central and Eastern European countries and Poland's foreign policy and distinctives in EU politics in the last few decades.

### **Special Issue on Polish Foreign Policy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

As every researcher who is interested in Polish foreign policy knows, Norman Davies's famous books -the volumes *God's Playground* and *Heart of Europe*, written in English- have been illuminating for those who want to comprehend Poland deeply with a historical perspective (Davies, 2005; Davies 2001). Concurrent with the emergence of Poland in the new international system as a new actor after the Cold War, the number of academic studies about Polish foreign policy has increased. (See: Kuzniar, 2001; Kuzniar, 2008; Kuzniar, 2009; Friszke, 2003; Gerard & Michowicz, 2005; Harasimowicz, 2005; Bielen, 2011; Zieba, 2010; Zieba, 2013). Parallel to this, academic interest in the subject has also increased, which can be observed through widespread publications in several languages in the literature. In addition, the evolution of Polish foreign policy can be easily observed by examining the annual and quarterly publications of PISM (the Polish Institute of International Affairs - *Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych*), such as the Yearbook of Polish Foreign Policy, *Rocznik Polskiej Polityki Zagranicznej*, *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny*, *Polskie Dokumenty Dyplomatyczne*, and the Polish Quarterly of International Affairs.

The issue aims to analyze and understand Polish foreign policy in the post-Cold War era. The following articles offer insights into different aspects of Poland's foreign policy. The first ones are concentrated on a more general framework and the others focus on internal and external determinants as well as some examples of the implications of Poland's foreign policy on specific regions and topics.

In his article, Ryszard Zieba provides a broad picture of Polish foreign policy. The article discusses the reasons for Poland's detrimental politics, which damage Poland in a massive way both in Europe and the world. Even though Poland was the first country to adopt democratic and market reforms in Central Europe, gradually populism, nationalism and Euro-skepticism have increased their impact in the country. Therefore, Zieba's point of view, which focuses on the populism, illiberalism, and authoritarianism that began dominating Polish internal politics and nationalism and Euro-skepticism in its foreign policy, is essential in order to understand the current situation and serious challenges in Polish politics.

Robert Kupiecki's article provides an excellent historical overview of Poland's security policy in the post-1989 era. Since Poland efficiently reconstructed its foreign and security policy after 40 years of Soviet domination, it is important to comprehend the milestones of Polish political transformation. Kupiecki's analysis begins with the key historical factors contributing to continuity and change in this policy and then continues with Poland's path to NATO and subsequent national priorities as a member of the Alliance, the role of the US in Polish security policy, the approach to collective security, and the role of the EU, as well as referring to contemporary challenges confronting the national security policy.

Andrzej Szeptycki provides an important picture of populist foreign policy and its consequences by analyzing the case of Poland under the rule of Law and Justice. Understanding the rise of populism, with its visible impact particularly in Central Europe, is essential for understanding "democratic backsliding since 2010." Accordingly, the author's analysis, which precisely emphasizes foreign policy under the rule of Law and Justice (which is considered ineffective due to Poland's growing isolation) and the deterioration of democratic standards in the country, as well as analyzing Russian pressure and the electoral victory of Joe Biden in the context of Poland's vulnerability, brings important insights on that issue.

Karol Bieniek and Özgün Erlər Bayır's article primarily focuses on the problem of using public diplomacy and soft power as a tool in Polish foreign policy making by analyzing the potential of Poland, implications of public diplomacy, and soft power use in Polish foreign policy making. Public diplomacy as the vision of the 21<sup>st</sup> century paves the way for placing importance on this tool in countries' foreign policy making processes. However, it is also important for countries to realize their potential or limit when they apply this tool. Since Poland has used public diplomacy and soft power more visibly after the EU accession period, it is crucial to answer the question of where the limits of the use of these tools are and what positive and negative effects can they bring.

In their article, Adam Szymanski and Łukasz Zamęcki present qualitative research on the instruments which were used by the Polish government in 2020 for dealing with the Covid-19 situation. Unlike other countries, Poland did not formally introduce a state of emergency during 2020. However, particular regulations were implemented in the country. Since the scope of the regulations was extensive, Szymanski and Zamęcki's analysis is important for understanding the motives of the Polish government and the further deterioration of the state of democracy in the country.

Anita Budziszewska and Anna Solarz look specifically at the analysis of religion as one component element of state identity. In particular, religion and related values are regarded as the key variables for Poland in identifying the state identity. To have a better understanding of the role of religion in building state identities, the authors analyze a theoretical part, which introduces the relevant theory and research on religion's role in shaping domestic policy and state identity, and attempt to answer questions as to how a religion-based state identity is made tangible in foreign policy and in that way also in international relations.

In his article, Mustafa Çağatay Aslan identifies party-level foreign policy and the mechanics of party competition by getting a closer look at the PiS's Euroscepticism and

its dominance over right-wing politics in Poland from 2001-2015. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, EU membership was considered Poland's top agenda item; it represented the idea of a "return to Europe." Despite the particular opposition to EU-policies by mainstream political parties and complete opposition to membership by fringe parties, massive public support played a vital role in EU membership. However, when Poland became an EU member, Eurosceptic policies increased their influence in Polish politics from the fringe parties to the mainstream right, including the Law and Justice Party. Therefore, Aslan's deep analysis, which is based on using the dichotomy of Szczerbiak and Taggart's soft-Euroscepticism and hard-Euroscepticism, assists in comprehending PiS foreign policy.

Adam Ambroziak's article provides a remarkable overview of Poland's extra-EU trade after the EU accession period. When Poland became an EU member state in 2004, they adopted particular economic regulations, including transferring national competences in the field of external trade policy to EU institutions. Currently, Poland has a high intra-EU trade rate, which is not only related with Poland's accession to the EU but also the legal circumstances and limited national competences in the shaping of external trade relations that led to change in the geographic and product structure of Polish foreign trade. Therefore, Ambroziak's analysis, which identifies changes in both directions and products in Poland's extra-EU imports and exports after EU accession, is crucial for getting a closer look at Poland's position and comparing it with other V4 countries.

In his article, Robert Kłaczynski illuminates Poland's natural gas energy strategy in the context of the EU's energy policy by referring to key problems related to the functioning of the Polish fuel market in the field of resources, production, consumption, and especially raw material supply. Since the priority of the EU is to ensure the security of its member states, energy security, with its increasing importance, remains a part of this policy. Therefore, the author's point of view, which emphasizes not only the situation in the Polish natural gas sector, but also the European condition, gives a broader picture of both Poland's natural gas energy strategy and the EU's energy policy.

Arthur Adamczyk provides an excellent historical overview of the evolution of Poland's foreign policy towards the Balkan region from 1989 to the present. Adamczyk's analysis begins with the period of 1989-2004, which contains the dissolution of the Eastern Bloc and Poland's full accession to the Euro-Atlantic structures, and continues with the second period, 2004-2010, when Poland implemented compatible Balkan policies with the EU. Lastly, Adamczyk's analysis focuses on the third stage, which begins with Poland's preparations for the EU Council Presidency in 2011, when Poland was eager to create policy towards the Balkans. Even though Poland has been part of the policies that were implemented towards Balkan regions since 1989, it is apparent that currently their policies in the region are considered limited. Thus, Arthur Adamczyk's article plays an important role in having a better understanding of the underlying reasons for Poland's limited policy in the region currently and the relationship between Poland and the Balkan states.

Rafał Ożarowski explores contemporary dilemmas of Polish foreign policy towards the Middle East by analyzing the cases of Iraq and Qatar. Even though Poland historically has connections with Middle Eastern states in order to achieve their foreign policy aims in the region, nowadays two kinds of interests, which can be classified as economic and



political, dominate in their foreign policy making process. Therefore, Ożarowski's article initially focuses on Poland's current economic interest related to signing an agreement with Qatar for diversifying its gas and oil supplies, and then the political one, which is basically about engagement in the mission of stabilization in Iraq. The article is significant because the author answers the question of whether or not Polish foreign policy in the Middle East is effective or not and the reasons behind this, and because it emphasizes both the real capabilities of Polish foreign policy and the key obstacles in the Middle East.

Przemysław Osiewicz's article explores the impact of external determinants on Poland-Iran political relations during the presidency of Hassan Rouhani from 2013-2021. In his article, the author addresses specific external conditions, which include the nuclear agreement concluded with Iran in 2015, the policy of the US, with particular emphasis on the extended sanctions imposed on Iran and the EU's policy towards Iran, and Iran's rivalry with some countries in the Middle East region (such as Israel and Saudi Arabia) whose relations with Poland are regarded as close and stable. Qualitative content analysis is applied as the main research technique.

This special issue strives to present a diverse selection of various internal and external determinants as well as implications/outcomes of Poland's foreign policy. It is obvious that Poland has been a remarkable country both in world politics and in European politics, particularly in the last decades. In addition to its economic potential and demographic structure, Poland is located in the "center" of the Central and Eastern Europe region as a large country whose desire is to establish itself as a strong actor in the international system and consolidate its power. Thus, Poland's foreign policy stance, steps, collaborations, and tendencies are worth examining in order to understand the future of European integration. In particular, considering events such as the migration crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, I believe that the articles in this special issue, which is based on examples from Poland, will be useful for readers who are curious about issues related to Euroscepticism and the rise of the extreme right, as well as concepts such as identity, national interest, and national sovereignty, which have been critical topics in the European political agenda since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support

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