

Poland's Foreign Policy Transformation in the Post-Cold War Era

Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Dönemde Polonya'nın Dış Politika Dönüşümü

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Abstract

This article examines Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy transformation through the lens of neoclassical realism, focusing on its integration into Western institutions and the strategic recalibration driven by evolving global dynamics. In this context, this article hypothesizes that Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy has been shaped not only-as the previous decades-by systemic pressures favouring Western integration, but also by domestic political dynamics which, particularly under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), later it have mediated these pressures and produced a more selective, assertive, and regionally oriented foreign policy orientation with the emerging multipolarity. Following the collapse of the bipolar order in 1991, the United States emerged as the dominant global actor, while the rise of globalization reshaped the country's western centric international relations. In this context, Poland redefined its foreign policy objectives by prioritizing first, accession to NATO and later the European Union, and aligning itself with transatlantic security structures during second Iraq Wars. The study explores Poland's democratization process, its engagement with international financial institutions during the transition to a market economy, and the consolidation of its new regional geopolitical position through initiatives such as the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative. Furthermore, the study examines the EU's ineffectiveness in the face of economic, migration, security, Russian revisionism questions with the evolution of multipolarity of global system which all particular attention is paid to the strategic alliance with the United States and the evolution of energy security policies aimed at reducing dependence on Russia. Moreover, the article assesses the implications of populist governance under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), highlighting rising tensions with the European Union, challenges to the rule of law, and the restructuring of diplomatic institutions. Drawing on both descriptive and discursive qualitative content analysis of policy documents due to contribute more to Turkish academic literature, this study argues that while Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy initially revolved around from transition to Western integration, however, recent years have witnessed a shift to diversity toward assertive regionalism and selective trans-Atlanticism shaped by domestic political change.

Keywords: Polish Foreign Policy, NATO and EU Integration, Strategic Autonomy, Energy Security, Populism, Rule of Law.

Öz

Bu makale, Polonya'nın Soğuk Savaş sonrası dış politika dönüşümünü neo-klasik realizm çerçevesinde incelemekte; özellikle Batılı kurumlara entegrasyonu ve küresel dinamiklerin evrimiyle şekillenen stratejik yeniden konumlanmayı ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, Polonya'nın Soğuk Savaş sonrası dış politikasının ilk dönemlerde olduğu gibi yalnızca Batı'ya entegrasyonu teşvik eden sistemik baskılarla değil, aynı zamanda çok kutupluluğun etkisiyle özellikle Hukuk ve Adalet Partisi (PiS) döneminde belirginleşen iç siyasal dinamiklerin bu baskıları aracılık ederek daha seçici, iddialı ve bölgeselci bir dış politika yönelimi üretmesiyle şekillendiği hipotezini ileri sürmektedir. 1991 yılında iki kutuplu düzenin çökmesinin ardından Amerika Birleşik Devletleri baskın küresel aktör olarak öne çıkarken; küreselleşmenin yükselişi de ülkenin batı eksenli uluslararası ilişkilerini şekillendirmiştir. Bu çerçevede Polonya, dış politika hedeflerini yeniden tanımlayarak önce NATO ve sonra Avrupa Birliği'ne katılmayı öncelik haline getirmiş ve öncesinde transatlantik güvenlik yapılarıyla ikinci Irak Savaşında konumlanmıştır. Çalışma, Polonya'nın demokratikleşme sürecini, piyasa ekonomisine geçiş döneminde uluslararası finans kuruluşlarıyla kurduğu ilişkileri ve Visegrad Grubu ile Üç Deniz Girişimi gibi bölgesel inisiyatifler aracılığıyla yeni bölgesel jeopolitik konumunu pekiştirmesini ele almaktadır. Ayrıca, çalışmada AB'nin ekonomik, göç, güvenlik sorunları ve Rusya'nın yayılmacılığı karşısında etkisiz kalması, küresel sistemin çok kutupluluğa evrilmesi, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ile kurulan stratejik ittifaka ve Rusya'ya olan enerji bağımlılığını azaltmaya yönelik enerji güvenliği politikalarının evrimine de özel bir dikkat gösterilmektedir. Makale esas olarak, Hukuk ve Adalet Partisi (PiS) yönetimindeki populist yönetişimin etkilerini değerlendirmekte; Avrupa Birliği ile artan gerilimleri, hukukun üstünlüğüne yönelik tehditleri ve diplomatik kurumların yeniden yapılandırılmasını irdelemektedir. Çalışmanın yöntemi hem betimleyici hem de tartışmacı niteliksel içerik

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analizine dayanmaktadır; resmi Politika belgelerinden yararlanılarak Türk uluslararası ilişkiler literatürüne katkı yapılmak istenmiştir. Bu çalışma, Polonya'nın Soğuk Savaş sonrası dış politikasının başlangıçta Batı'ya geçiş ve entegrasyon etrafında şekillendiğini, ancak son yıllarda iç siyasi değişimlerle yön verilen daha iddialı bir bölgeselcilik ve seçici transatlantikçiliğe doğru kayma, bu yönüyle dış politikada çeşitlilik yaşandığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Polonya Dış Politikası, NATO ve AB Entegrasyonu, Stratejik Özerklik, Enerji Güvenliği, Popülizm, Hukukun Üstünlüğü.

Introduction

The decline of the bipolar world order in 1991 radically reconfigured the framework of international relations. The fall of the Soviet Union not only ended more decades-long ideological confrontation but also created a fluid geopolitical environment defined by unipolar dominance, accelerating globalization, and shifting regional dynamics. For Poland, a nation long shaped by its precarious position between Germany and Russia, this historical rupture opened a strategic window to reassert its sovereignty, redefine its foreign policy orientation, and integrate into Western political, economic, and security frameworks. The newly emerging international context enabled a profound reorientation toward transatlantic alliances, particularly through NATO and the European Union, while also compelling domestic reforms to align with liberal democratic norms.

Poland's post-communist trajectory illustrates a deliberate departure from Soviet dependency toward Western integration, motivated by the dual imperatives of securing national independence and achieving political and economic modernization. NATO membership in 1999 and EU accession in 2004 marked turning points in this process, providing institutional anchors for security, development, and regional cooperation. As democratization advanced and economic transformation unfolded, Poland gradually assumed a more prominent role in Central and Eastern Europe, both as a bridge between East and West and as an assertive actor within regional platforms such as the Visegrad Group and the Three Seas Initiative. Strategic ties with the U.S., especially in the areas of defence and energy security, further reinforced Poland's alignment with transatlantic structures.

In recent years, domestic political shifts have introduced new complexities into Poland's foreign policy. The rise of populist-nationalist governance under the Law and Justice Party (PiS) has contributed to a recalibration of external relations, marked by a more pronounced emphasis on national sovereignty, historical identity, and regional autonomy. While core transatlantic partnerships have remained intact, relations with supranational institutions such as the European Union have faced increasing tension, particularly around related matters to the autonomy of the judiciary and adherence to legal norms. Rather than a complete departure from Poland's Euro-Atlantic orientation, these developments reflect a nuanced repositioning that blends traditional alliance commitments with a stronger assertion of domestic priorities. This strategic adjustment mirrors broader international trends in which evolving domestic politics shape the external posture of states navigating an increasingly complex global order.

This article adopts a neoclassical realist framework to trace Poland's foreign policy transformation in the post-Cold War era, focusing on the interplay between systemic pressures and domestic political structures. In addition to situating Poland within the evolving European security architecture, the study also provides a broader methodological insight into how foreign policy analysis can be conducted. By combining macro-periodization and case-based discussion, the article explores Poland's evolving foreign policy orientations across key historical phases.

In addition to grounding the discussion in a neoclassical realist framework, this study offers a comprehensive macro-periodic analysis of Poland's foreign policy transformation following the post-Cold War era. The article examines how systemic pressures and internal

political dynamics intersected over time, resulting in concrete foreign policy orientations that evolved across different historical periods.

The study first elaborates the theoretical and methodological foundation, explaining how neoclassical realism incorporates both international structures and domestic-level factors such as strategic culture, leadership preferences, and institutional legacies. It then proceeds with an analysis of global structural changes following the Cold War, including shifts in polarity, the rise of globalization, and the post-1989 liberal international order, which redefined the strategic environment Poland operated in.

Subsequent sections focus on Poland's internal transformation, highlighting the democratic transition and the accompanying realignment of foreign policy priorities toward Western institutions. This includes a comprehensive assessment of Poland's integration into the NATO and the EU, tracing the institutional, legal, and political processes that enabled its full membership. These sections also address how the experience of Europeanization and transatlantic security cooperation shaped Poland's behaviour once a member state.

In parallel, the article explores the economic foundations of Poland's foreign policy posture. Attention is paid to the involvement of international monetary bodies during the transition to a market economy, as well as Poland's trade diversification and energy strategies in the post-accession period. These developments are contextualized within a broader strategic effort to enhance autonomy and regional leadership capacity.

The study analyses Poland's bilateral and multilateral engagements in the contemporary international system, especially its relations within the Visegrad Group and its deepening strategic partnership with the United States. Throughout, the article illustrates how Poland's concrete foreign policy choices reflect both external structural imperatives and internally driven political change, thereby providing a grounded example of how historically situated foreign policy analysis can be conducted.

This study adopts a neoclassical realist framework to analyse Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy transformation by focusing on the interaction between systemic pressures and domestic political dynamics. While the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the bipolar international system created strong external incentives for Western integration through NATO and the European Union, this study argues that these systemic pressures alone are insufficient to fully explain the evolution of Poland's foreign policy. Instead, domestic political conditions, elite perceptions, and governing discourses have played a crucial mediating role in shaping foreign policy preferences and strategic orientations. In this context, this article hypothesizes that Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy has been shaped not only by systemic pressures favouring Western integration, but also by domestic political dynamics which, particularly under the Law and Justice Party (PiS), have mediated these pressures and produced a more selective, assertive, and regionally oriented foreign policy orientation.

Theoretical Framework

Neoclassical realism

Neoclassical realism, as articulated by Gideon Rose (1998), offers a compelling framework for analysing foreign policy by bridging the gap between systemic theories of international relations and the domestic sources of state behaviour. Unlike classical realism, which emphasizes human nature and the pursuit of power, or structural realism, which highlights the anarchic nature of the international structure and proportional material capabilities, neoclassical realism notifies that states do not react to external pressures automatically or uniformly. Instead, these pressures are mediated through unit-level intervening

variables such as internal political institutions, leadership perceptions, strategic culture, or national identity (Rose, 1998, p. 146-148).

At the core of neoclassical realism is the belief that foreign policy is shaped by both international constraints and domestic incentives. Systemic stimuli, such as shifts in power distribution or external threats, are necessary but insufficient to explain state behaviour unless filtered through domestic mechanisms of decision-making and resource mobilization (Rose, 1998, p. 152-153). Thus, this approach restores agency to state actors while preserving the explanatory power of the international system. In this regard, domestic political conditions, governing discourses, and elite perceptions constitute key intervening variables within the neoclassical realist framework. Political narratives related to sovereignty, national identity, and historical memory shape how systemic pressures are interpreted by decision-makers and translated into foreign policy preferences. Consequently, changes in domestic political leadership or ideology can result in significant variations in foreign policy behaviour, even under stable international structural conditions.

Applying this framework to Poland allows for a nuanced analysis of its foreign policy trajectory, particularly in the post-Cold War period. As Poland navigated its path from post-communist transition to EU and NATO membership and beyond, systemic imperatives like security concerns over Russia and alignment with the West were consistently filtered through domestic political dynamics, including elite preferences, electoral cycles, and ideological shifts, especially during the tenure of the Law and Justice (PiS) government after 2015. Therefore, neoclassical realism is particularly well-suited to understand Poland's evolving strategic behaviour, which cannot be fully captured by systemic theories alone (Rose, 1998, p. 154-155).

In addition to its theoretical anchoring in neoclassical realism, this study also offers a broader methodological insight into how foreign policy analysis can be elaborated. By incorporating comparative macro-periodization and examining distinct historical turning points such as the early post-communist era and the populist-nationalist turn after 2015, the article demonstrates how external pressures, and domestic structures interact over time. Through detailed exploration of Poland's concrete foreign policy decisions such as NATO accession, energy diversification, and the evolution of its relationship with Germany and Russia, the study not only assesses theoretical assumptions but also provides a model for conducting historically grounded foreign policy analysis. In which situations what kind of strategies that the Poland pursues to balance those complementary or conflicting interests and threats in the multiple level.

Recent domestic political developments in Poland further illustrate the relevance of neoclassical realism. The opposition bloc's electoral victory in 2023 marked a critical shift in domestic political constraints and elite preferences, demonstrating how changes in internal political leadership can mediate Poland's response to systemic pressures without altering its core strategic alignment with NATO and the United States (Rose, 1998; Styczyńska, 2023).

Poland's Post-Cold War Foreign Policy in the Global Context

After the Second World War later in 1945, ideological and geopolitical tensions emerged between the USA and the USSR. While the USA defended capitalist democracy and the free market system, the USSR was trying to spread a socialist order based on Marxist-Leninist ideology (Gaddis, 2005, p. 13).

- Under Stalin's leadership, the USSR aimed to create buffer zones against threats from the West. In this context, it expanded its spheres of influence over territories in Eastern Europe.

- The U.S. aimed to stabilize Europe with financial and defence assistance to ensure collective security and implemented strategies such as the Marshall Plan and the Truman Doctrine within this scope.

Churchill's "Iron Curtain" metaphor (1946) defined the ideological split dividing Eastern from Western Europe. This division formed the basic basis of the Cold War. At the Potsdam Conference of 1945, Stalin, Truman, and Churchill had significant disagreements over the future of Germany. While Stalin wanted to weaken Germany with reparations, Western leaders defended their goals of economic reconstruction. In 1947, with the Truman Doctrine, the US took its first concrete step against communist expansion by providing \$400 million in aid to Greece and Türkiye. A year later, a communist coup in Czechoslovakia on 25 February, 3 April 1948 Marshall Plan- European Economic recovery Act signed by the President Truman, the Soviet Union's attempted blockade of West Berlin triggered the Berlin Crisis; the West responded with the Berlin Airlift, preventing the Soviets from achieving their goal and paving the way for the establishment of NATO. With the establishment of NATO in 1949, the Western Bloc gained an organized defence mechanism against Soviet expansion. The Korean conflict, sparked by the invasion of South Korea by the North in 1950, clearly showed that the Cold War had moved to Asia. In 1957, the Soviets launched the first artificial satellite, called Sputnik, into space, which was an alarming signal that led the US to make major investments in science and technology. Amid the 1962 Cuban Crisis, the USSR aimed to install nuclear missiles in Cuba brought global tensions to a critical peak, while diplomatic negotiations between Kennedy and Khrushchev de-escalated the crisis. Subsequently, the SALT I agreement between the U.S. and the SU contributed to the emergence of détente during the 1970s. After Afghanistan invasion by the SU, In the 1980s, the Reagan administration's heavy military spending and the Star Wars Project exacerbated the vulnerabilities of the Soviet command economy and hastened the dissolution of the USSR. These formative events in the trajectory of the Cold War became fundamental elements shaping the bipolar world order. Stalin emphasized the establishment of communist regimes in the territories he gained after the war. The Soviet communist intervention both in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the establishment of puppet regimes in Poland were the results of these policies (Gaddis, 2005, p. 90-91). The USA, on the other hand, tried to prevent the spread of communism by focusing on economic development. The Marshall Plan helped reduce communist influence by facilitating Western Europe's post-war economic resurgence (Gaddis, 2005; Judt, 2005).

Turning Points:

- 1989: Destruction of the Berlin Wall - The fall of this symbolic wall separating East and West Germany symbolized the end of the Cold War. This event marked the collapse of Soviet geopolitical dominance in Europe.
- 1991: The fragmentation of the USSR - With the demise of the Soviet Union, the US remained the winner of the Cold War. This consolidated the US's global leadership and led to the establishment of a hegemonic global structure (Güngör, 2022).

The transformation of the global system in the aftermath of the Cold War has become a fundamental area of study within the discipline of international relations. With the decline of the Cold War in 1991, the bipolar order gave way to a structure in which multipolarity, discussed, and this situation reshaped both the structure of the international system and the roles of the actors. The end of the Cold War in 1991 marked a pivotal milestone moment in international affairs, ushering in an era of global transformation. This period, often referred to as the "post-Cold War era," saw significant geopolitical, economic, and cultural changes that reshaped the global order. From the dissolution of the USSR to the rise of new global powers, these changes revealed the shifting dynamics of international systems and the interdependence

of states. “It was not the courage of leaders but a chain of events, often unforeseen, that ended the Cold War” (Gaddis, 2005, p. 154).

General Characteristics of the World After the Cold War

- The hegemonic power of the USA after the Cold War, felt intensely in the 1990s. However, especially as of the 2000s, multipolarity has come back to the agenda with the integration process of the European Union, the economic rise of China and the influence of other regional actors (Aktaş, 2010, p. 65).
- Advances in commercialization and technology have increased the effects of globalization and deepened the connections between national economies. However, this situation has also brought economic inequalities and the influence of multinational corporations.
- Weaker regional actors such as India, Brazil and Türkiye began to follow more independent foreign policies after 1991, and this situation accelerated the construction process of the multipolar order (Zakaria, 2008).

Immediately after the Cold War, a single-superpower international framework spearheaded by the U.S. emerged. As the sole superpower, the USA had an unprecedented power of influence in global affairs. This reflected in its leadership role in the Gulf War (1990-1991) and in the expansion of neoliberal economic policies at the global level (Günör, 2022, p. 74). However, this unipolarity faced various challenges as regional powers increased their influence.

Russia’s re-emergence as a principal factor in global politics has been remarkable. Notwithstanding the economic and political challenges experienced in the 1990s during the Boris Yeltsin era, Russia’s multiple and Arctic policies reflected its various regional strategic goals. The Arctic region, with its vast natural resources and strategic military importance, became one of the cornerstones of Russia’s strategic agenda in the early 2000s. The document “Basic Principles of the Arctic State Policy of the Russian Federation to 2020 and Beyond” adopted in 2008 emphasized this focus, highlighting sovereignty, economic development, and military preparedness (Günör, 2022, p. 82).

Economic globalization, accelerated by technological developments and trade liberalization, became one of the distinctive pillars of the post-Cold War era. Multinational corporations (MNCs) have shaped economic policies as influential actors, contributing to the interconnection of markets. These corporations have played a significant role in integrating developing economies into the global market, often promoting industrialization and urbanization (Aktaş, 2010, p. 38-52). However, the dominance of MNCs has also highlighted inequalities. While they bring capital and innovation, they have often prioritized profit over local development, thus increasing income inequality in developing countries. This dual effect has reflected broader tensions within globalization, leading to intense debate.

There have also been significant changes in ideology. The triumph of liberal democracy and capitalism which has been celebrated as the “end of history” by scholars such as Francis Fukuyama. However, this optimism that has been overshadowed by the rise of identity politics and cultural nationalism. The breakup of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s and the ethnic conflicts that followed have clearly demonstrated the difficulties of reconciling national identity with global integration (Fukuyama, 1992). In addition, the spread of information technologies has transformed cultural interactions. The Internet has enabled unprecedented access to information, enabling cross-cultural interactions and the spread of ideas. This digital revolution has further eroded traditional boundaries between states and societies, highlighting the interconnected nature in the international order following the Cold War. International

organizations, including the UN, NATO, and the EU, have adapted to the new realities in the post-Cold War period. Initially established as a counterweight to the Soviet threat, NATO has redefined its goals to signify global security threats, terrorism, and regional conflicts. The EU has encouraged economic and political integration by integrating Eastern European states (Judt, 2005). However, these institutions have also been criticized for their bias and ineffectiveness. The 2003 US intervention in Iraq without UN approval exposed the limitations of multilateralism in the face of unilateral actions by powerful states.

Global change has also brought environmental issues to the forefront of international agendas. Climate change has emerged as a critical challenge with far-reaching geopolitical and security implications. The melting of Arctic glaciers triggered by global warming has created new opportunities as well as tensions. For Russia, the Arctic has become a strategic priority, striking a balance between cooperation and competition with other Arctic states (Günör, 2022, p. 102).

Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy paralleled global transformations. Having broken free from Soviet domination, Poland prioritized integration with Western institutions. Joining NATO in 1999 and then into the EU in 2004 were important milestones in this journey. These integrations underlined Poland's commitment to democratic values and its strategic interests against potential Russian aggression. Poland's role in shaping EU policies on energy security and relations with Eastern Europe demonstrated its growing influence. Its advocacy for reducing dependence on Russian gas and diversifying energy sources demonstrated how its geopolitical and economic interests were intertwined within the post-Cold War geopolitical framework. (Judt, 2005)

Poland's Foreign Policy after 1989 and Integration into Global Institutions with a Focus on Eastern Neighbours

Poland has historically faced pressure from its two powerful neighbours, Germany and Russia. The process of partitioning Poland, which began in 1772, continued in the 20th century with the occupations of Nazi State and the Stalin's Soviet Union. Poland, which was incorporated into the Soviet sphere of influence in the aftermath of World War II, remained completely dependent on Moscow in its foreign security policies until it gained independence in 1989. (Walczak, 2004, p. 15). Poland's post-independence security strategy is shaped by the aim of creating a balanced defence mechanism against both the Russian threat from the east and the potential resurgence of Germany (Walczak, 2004, p. 18-20). In particular, the geopolitical vacuum that emerged after the falling apart of the Eastern Bloc in the early 1990s heightened Warsaw's strategic anxieties.

Although Poland had limited sovereignty during the Cold War, it managed to establish a unique presence in the international arena and gained a certain level of confidence in the process. The political change that occurred in 1989 necessitated a radical transformation in both domestic and foreign policy. This change occurred as Poland adopted an open stance towards Western integration and aimed to join prominent Western multilateral bodies like NATO and the EU (Kuźniar, 2000, p. 20-24).

Poland's relations with the newly sovereign independent countries that emerged after the collapse of the USSR are also important. Poland was among the first countries to recognize the sovereignty of neighbouring states such as Ukraine and Belarus. These relations developed based on "good neighbourliness and friendly cooperation" and a friendship treaty what signed with Ukraine in 1992 (Sulowski, 2013, p. 29-30). However, Poland's relations with Belarus became complicated with the rise to power of Alexander Lukashenko. Poland supports the democratic opposition in Belarus and opposes human rights violations.

Poland's foreign policy after 1989 which shaped by an effort to strike a balance between Western integration and the securing of national interests. The transatlantic component has been an important part of this policy, especially Poland's pro the U.S. policies in the 2003 Iraq War, which has led to diplomatic tensions with between its allies in Europe. This situation has revealed the need for Poland to strike a strategic balance between the U.S. and the European Union in its foreign policy. While participation in Western alliances what is considered a key element of security and economic development for Poland, historical and geopolitical factors continue to be decisive in relations with its neighbours.

The Main Objectives of Poland's Foreign Policy and the Impact of International Financial Institutions on the Transition to a Market Economy

The principal purpose of Polish foreign policy after 1989 was to ensure national security and to integrate with the West. To achieve this goal, Poland moved towards joining first NATO and later becoming an official member state of the European Union. This process dominated Poland's foreign policy until 2003. However, Poland's strategic choices during this period were influenced by the dynamics of changes in the global order and internal conditions. Poland's relations with Germany had a significant impact on this process. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 redefined Polish German relations, and these relations what put on a legal basis with the border agreement signed on 14 November 1990 (Geremek, 1989).

The shift towards a market economy in Poland started in January 1990, after decades of inefficiency in the centrally planned system. Reform attempts, particularly in the 1980s, failed to resolve structural problems such as state ownership and the lack of market mechanisms. By the end of the 1980s, the Polish economy which characterized by a foreign debt of \$43.3 billion, large trade deficits, and systemic inefficiencies. Therefore, Poland requested assistance from international financial institutions to implement a comprehensive economic reform program (Wilczyński, 1994, p. 37).

IMF Contributions

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) played a significant role in Poland's economic transformation by providing financial support and technical guidance. In 1990, the IMF approved a 13-month stand-by loan of \$710 million, but only its \$470 million what used (Wilczyński, 1994, p. 40). The main focuses of the program were macroeconomic stabilization, fiscal discipline, monetary tightening, and price liberalization. The main measures were:

- Reduction of subsidies from 30% of budget expenditures in 1989 to 10% in 1990.
- One-time devaluation of the zloty by 40%.
- Imposition of high taxes on wage increases exceeding set limits.

Despite initial successes such as a budget surplus and stability in foreign exchange reserves, harsh policies resulted in a 12% contraction in GDP, a 13% decline in industrial production, and an increase in unemployment to 6.1% (Wilczyński, 1994, p. 39). In 1991, the IMF launched the \$2.5 billion Extended Fund Facility for Medium-Term Reforms (EFF) program, but this program which also suspended due to failure to meet inflation control and budget deficit reduction targets.

World Bank Initiatives

The World Bank's intervention focused on structural reforms and investment projects. Between 1990 and 1992, Poland received \$2.6 billion in loans, of which \$575 million was

allocated to macroeconomic stabilization. The critical areas addressed by the structural adjustment programs were:

- The restructuring of publicly owned firms and anti-monopoly reforms.
- Financial sector reforms, including modernization of the banking system.
- Restructuring the social security system.
- Reduction of subsidies in the transportation, energy, and housing sectors.

Investment projects targeted transportation, energy, environmental protection, and agricultural infrastructure. However, due to administrative inefficiencies and the inexperience of enterprises in market-based decision-making, the credit utilization rate remained at 22% (Wilczyński, 1994, p. 44).

Contributions from the European Investment Bank (EIB) and EBRD

The EIB and EBRD supported Poland's transition by financing infrastructure and private sector investment. The EIB provided six loans totalling \$360 million in the areas of transport, energy, and telecommunications, but only a third of these funds were used. The EBRD's \$650 million support focused on the following areas:

- Restructuring state-owned enterprises.
- Development of telecommunications and heating networks.
- Support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).
- Financing of environmental and energy projects.

The International Financial Institutions' (IFIs) programs were instrumental in delivering short-term stability, but it was criticized for ignoring Poland's unique challenges. These included an over-reliance on demand reduction, delayed structural reforms and privatization, and insufficient domestic savings that failed to sustain growth and investment. Despite these criticisms, Poland made noteworthy progress by 1992, bringing inflation under control, GDP growing by 2%, and private sector industrial production accounting for one third (Wilczyński, 1994, p. 47). International financial institutions made a significant contribution to the transformation of Poland's economy towards a market system through providing financial support, technical expertise, and a framework for structural reform. However, these programs which criticized as being overly restrictive, even though they provide the basis for long-term economic stability and growth.

The Formation and Operation of the Visegrad Group and Its Relations with the European Union

The Visegrad Group (V4) is a territorial cooperation platform in Central Europe, consisting of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Established in 1991, this group aimed to accelerate integration into the European Union (EU) and ensure stability in the region, along with the geopolitical transformations that emerged after the Cold War (Yeşiltaş and Erdem, 2021, p. 2963-2964).

The roots of the Visegrad Group date back to the historical congress hosted by King Charles I of Hungary in the town of Visegrad in 1335. At this meeting, commercial and political cooperation which sought to developed between the kingdoms of Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia. This cooperation which revived in 1991, established to support the democratic transformations that emerged after the downfall of the communist regimes in Central Europe and to accelerate integration with the West.

Established in 1991 by Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia, this group which named the "Visegrad Four" (V4) after the peaceful dissolution of Czechoslovakia in 1993, when the Czech Republic and Slovakia separated (Yeşiltaş and Erdem, 2021, p. 2965-2966). The main goal of the V4 is to accelerate European integration through regional cooperation and to achieve full membership in Western agencies such as NATO and the EU. The group achieved this goal concisely by becoming an official member of the EU in 2004. Getting rid of the remnants of communism and integration into the market economy are among the main goals of the group.

The Visegrad Group's relations with the EU entered a new era with full membership in 2004. However, the member countries of the group often display an opposing stance within the EU. In particular, the refugee crisis in 2014 led the V4 countries to oppose EU policies. The tough stance of Hungary and Poland on immigration policies has caused the V4 to face criticism within the EU (Dangerfield, 2008). The V4 countries have an important economic position within the EU. Although Germany is the largest trading partner of the V4 countries, the V4 states are among the countries that benefit the most from the EU budget. Poland is the state that benefits the most from the EU budget and according to 2018 data, financial aid to Poland amounted to 13.5 billion Euros (World Bank, 2018).

Poland's Accession to NATO and the Conditions for Membership in the Context of Security Policies

Poland's joining to NATO synchronized with a period when the security structures in Europe were reshaped after the Cold War. Following the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact in 1991, Poland considered NATO membership to be the most effective way to ensure its security (Walczak, 2004, p. 3-6). Poland's geostrategic location, population, and military capacity were crucial factors for NATO, making Poland's accession to the alliance inevitable (Michta, 1995, p. 137-140).

Poland is in the middle of Europe, a critical buffer zone between Germany and Russia. This location makes Poland a bridge between Western and Eastern Europe or a buffer state when necessary. Poland's membership to NATO was one of the cornerstones that legitimized the alliance's expansion eastwards and ensured stability in Europe (Michta, 1995, p. 138). Poland took its first steps towards military cooperation in 1991 by joining NATO's "Partnership for Peace" (PfP) program. At the 1997 Madrid Summit, Poland, along with the Hungary and Czech Republic, promoted to become a member of NATO as part of the NATO expansion process. Poland formally became a NATO member on 12 March 1999 (Walczak, 2004, p. 2).

In 1995, the U.S. and its NATO member states established two basic criteria for membership: first, an unwavering commitment to a democratic process and civilian oversight of the military forces; and second, having the strong army capacity to contribute to collective defence (Pomfret, 1995, p. 1-3). In this context, Poland needed to make reforms in three areas to become a NATO member:

- Removing constitutional ambiguities,
- Regulating civil-military relations,
- Aligning the Polish Armed Forces with NATO standards.

One of the biggest difficulties in Poland's NATO accession process has been constitutional uncertainty. The "Small Constitution" (Mala Konstytucja), adopted in 1992, envisaged a mix of parliamentary and presidential systems, but did not provide a clear framework for the distribution of powers (Vinton, 1992). This uncertainty has led to conflicts of authority between the President and the Parliament. For instance, the collapse of the

Waldemar Pawlak government in 1995 created a serious risk of constitutional crisis (Michta, 1995, p. 138).

Civil-Military Relations and the Modernization of the Polish Armed Forces

Civilian-military interactions in Poland have been a critical area for NATO membership. The control of civilian authorities over the army remained weak, and the "Parys Affair" in 1992 was one of the clearest indicators of this problem. The intervention of Defence Minister Jan Parys in the army led to a crisis between the General Staff and the ministry and eventually led to Parys' dismissal. The "Drawsko Affair" in 1994 created a new crisis when senior generals voted no confidence in Defence Minister Piotr Kołodziejczyk (Michta, 1995, p. 142). These events showed that the army in Poland tended to act independently of civilians. In this context, the necessity of restructuring civil-military relations and increasing civilian control over the army for NATO membership emerged.

The Polish Military Forces have undergone a comprehensive restructuring process since the Cold War. The number of armed soldiers, reduced from 400,000 in 1989 to 250,000 by 1995. This downsizing process has paralleled the fact that Poland's defence spending has fallen below 2% of GDP. A law passed by parliament in 1995 pledged to increase this figure to 3% by 1997. The Polish army has prioritized the modernization of military equipment and training programs to comply with NATO standards. For example, the establishment of two air defence divisions and the procurement of multi-role combat aircraft have been important steps in this modernization process (Michta, 1995, p. 144).

Reasons for Poland's Accession to NATO and Relations with Russia in the Context of NATO Expansion

1. Poland had been invaded four times throughout its history, and it lost its sovereignty during these invasions. NATO membership, seen as a critical step to prevent the recurrence of these historical threats.
2. Germany's economic power and Russia's potential for renewed expansion in the post-Cold War created significant security concerns for Poland.
3. Emerging threats such as terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction, plus regional instability made NATO more attractive to Poland.
4. NATO membership encouraged Poland to reform its defence and economy. The "Army 2012" program, designed to modernize and professionalize the military (Walczak, 2004, p. 24).

Poland's NATO membership has made significant contributions to the country's security in both military and diplomatic fields. NATO's Article 5 has increased Poland's security by providing a collective security guarantee whereby aggression against one member, treated as aggression against the entire alliance. In addition, the Polish army has begun modernization projects to comply with NATO standards and has reduced its personnel and increased its professional military force, particularly through the "Army 2012" reform. NATO membership has supported regional stability by strengthening Poland's security collaboration with the Baltic countries and the Visegrad Group and has also provided economic and political stability by accelerating its European Union membership process.

Russia has perceived Poland's NATO membership as a geopolitical threat, and the military presence in Kaliningrad and Russian influence over Belarus have increased Poland's security concerns. Although this membership has not led to direct conflict with Russia, it has caused Russia to harden its policies towards the West. Poland's NATO membership has provided significant security against historical security threats and has strengthened the

country's national military and political structure. However, this membership has not eliminated all security concerns. NATO expansion has provided Poland with significant gains in terms of military security and regional stability, and has helped to establish a wider security network, particularly in the Baltic regional countries, Central and Eastern Europe.

The process of accession to the EU

Poland's admission process to the European Union (EU), considered not only as an expansion drive but also as a tool for political and economic transformation (Yang, 2008, p. 146). The EU's strategy of promoting stability and liberal economy in the Central and Eastern European Countries (CEE countries) has provided a model for Poland and has functioned as a catalyst for the country's democratization and economic reform process. Europeanization can be defined as the process by which countries adopt EU norms, values, and rules (Kratochwil, 1989, p. 126). This concept encompasses not only institutional arrangements but also social learning and identity transformation. In the case of Poland, Europeanization has taken shape because of both external incentives (economic assistance and the prospect of accession provided by the EU) and internal social learning (Obydenkova, 2006, p. 5).

Poland's formal admission process to the EU began by the decline of the Cold War, with the "European Agreement" signed by Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary with the European Community on 16 December 1991. This process was completed with the determination of the Copenhagen Criteria in 1993 and Poland's full membership status on 1 May 2004 (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2005, p. 10-15). The EU's policies towards Poland are characterized by two main approaches: transposition and socialization (Bomberg and Stubb, 2004, p. 116). Transposition refers to the transfer of decisions taken in Brussels into national law, while socialization ensures that the Polish people and political elites internalize EU norms and adopt a European identity. Poland's admission process to the EU has affected political development in more ways. In this process, issues such as enhancing democratic governance, consolidating the rule of law, and safeguarding fundamental rights have come to the fore (Wyrozumska, 2002, p. 9-13). In particular, the provision in the 1997 Constitution that international treaties shall be binding in domestic law reflects Poland's strategies to adapt to the EU membership.

Poland's political development has also been supported by EU financial aid and reform programs. The Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies (PHARE), Special Accession Programme for Agriculture and Rural Development (SAPARD) and Instrument for Structural Policies for Pre-Accession (ISPA) programs have contributed to Poland's economic and infrastructural transformation; the total PHARE funds provided to Poland between 1990 and 1995 reached European Currency Unit (ECU) 5.4 billion (European Commission, 1996).

Poland's foreign policy has been shaped by its EU membership and strong relations with NATO. Poland has integrated into the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policies (CFSP) on the one hand, while maintaining bilateral security relations with the U.S. on the other. Poland's EU membership process has also shaped the country's foreign policy decisions, encouraging the integration of countries on its eastern border, such as Ukraine and Belarus, into the EU. Poland's accession to the EU has brought about not only economic integration but also a profound political transformation. During this process, Poland has used the incentives and financial assistance provided by the EU to conduct its own internal reforms. Poland's integration into the EU is a model for other CEE countries and is considered a successful example of the EU's eastward expansion strategy.

Table 1: Comparative Dynamics of Poland's Europeanization

	Late 1980s to mid-1990s Polish Transformation	EU Admission
External Contributions	Mixed effects in this period	Costs and benefits calculation matter on the way to EU
Social Learning Process	The transformative ideas had grassroots, and derived from the outside world	The socialization of Internalized EU norms

Sources: The Europeanization of Central and Eastern Europe, eds. F. Schimmelfennig, U. Sedelmeier, Cornell 2005, p. 1–28

Table 1 captures an important shift in the logic of Poland's Europeanization over time. In the late 1980s and throughout the early post-Cold War years, external influences operated in a fragmented and often indirect manner, while political and societal change was largely driven by bottom-up learning processes and normative orientations shaped beyond the immediate framework of the European Community. Europeanization during this phase thus remained open-ended and only partially institutionalized. By the time of EU accession, however, this dynamic had changed in a fundamental way. The prospect of membership introduced clearer incentives and constraints, making adaptation to EU norms increasingly dependent on strategic calculations related to accession requirements. At the same time, social learning became more structured, as European norms were progressively internalized through formal mechanisms of socialization involving political elites and state institutions. Read together, the two phases suggest that Poland's Europeanization was neither linear nor uniform, but evolved from a loosely framed transformative process into a more disciplined and conditional form of integration.

Economic Impact of Poland's Accession to the EU (2004-2006)

Poland acceded to the EU on 1 May 2004, together with seven other post-communist countries (EU-8), Cyprus and Malta. This enlargement was an unprecedented step aimed at healing the economic and political divisions left by the Cold War. Poland's formal accession followed a long integration process that began with the signing of the Europe Treaty in 1991 and included the harmonization of 31 *Acquis Communautaire* chapters.

While Poland's admission to the EU, widely supported in a referendum in 2003, with 77% support and 58.9% turnout, the process was not without its challenges. Public support fluctuated due to systemic reform fatigue and opposition from Eurosceptic political groups. However, by the time of accession, Poland had implemented 94% of EU directives and demonstrated its commitment to integration (Balcerowicz, 2007, p. 6-7).

In the period 2004-2005, Poland showed strong economic growth of 4.2% per year on average, well above the 2% average for the EU-15. Poland's GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity, rose from 40.1% of the EU-15 average in 1997 to 46% in 2005. However, Poland continued to lag, behind the other New Member States (NMS) economically. Economic growth that was supported by capital accumulation and technical progress, but the labour force had a negative impact due to fundamental issues in the labour market structure. After Poland's admission to the EU, labour migration increased due to wage differentials and the ease of free movement within the EU. In 2004, about 250,000 Poles lived abroad for a minimum of two months, representing a 20% increase compared to 2003 (World Bank, 2006a). The main destinations for migration were the UK and Ireland, which opened their labour markets, but Germany was the country with the largest share of Polish immigrants, at 25%. The immigrants were mostly young, well-educated, and working in jobs below their qualifications. Although concerns about falling wages in host countries were unfounded, Poland experienced labour shortages in key sectors such as healthcare and construction, posing risks to long-term

economic growth and demographic stability (World Bank, 2006a). The liberalisation of trade under the 1991 Europe Agreement had achieved significant integration prior to 2004. By 2003, Polish exports had risen from 21.6% in 1994 to 33.4% (European Commission, 2006c). Following EU accession, exports increased by 14.2% in 2004 and 8.1% in 2005. Exports of agricultural products to the EU have increased due to EU subsidies, while imports from non-EU countries such as China have increased due to the adoption of the EU's Common Customs Tariff (Balcerowicz, 2007, p. 19).

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has played a vital role in Poland's economic modernization. After declining due to political uncertainty in the early 2000s, FDI reached €10.29 billion in 2004 after EU accession. More than 82% of FDI came from the EU-15 countries. The largest investors were the Netherlands (€16.4 billion), Germany (€12.3 billion) and France (€9.6 billion) (Balcerowicz, 2007, p. 22).

Poland acquired €7.5 billion from the EU budget between 2004 and 2006, while its contribution was €4.6 billion (Polish Government, 2006). A huge portion of the funds was used for agriculture (26.9%) and structural actions (23.1%). However, the absorption of funds was slow, which was associated with decentralized governance, regulatory inefficiencies, and administrative capacity deficiencies (Balcerowicz, 2007, p. 24). Public endorsement of Poland's EU membership increased after accession and reached 83% by 2006. Fifty-four percent of Poles thought that membership was beneficial for the country, while only 36% felt personal benefits. Perceived advantages included labour mobility, open borders, and EU financial support. However, 45% of Poles believed that EU membership benefited the former member states more.

From Growth to Influence - The Economic Drivers of Poland's External Behaviour

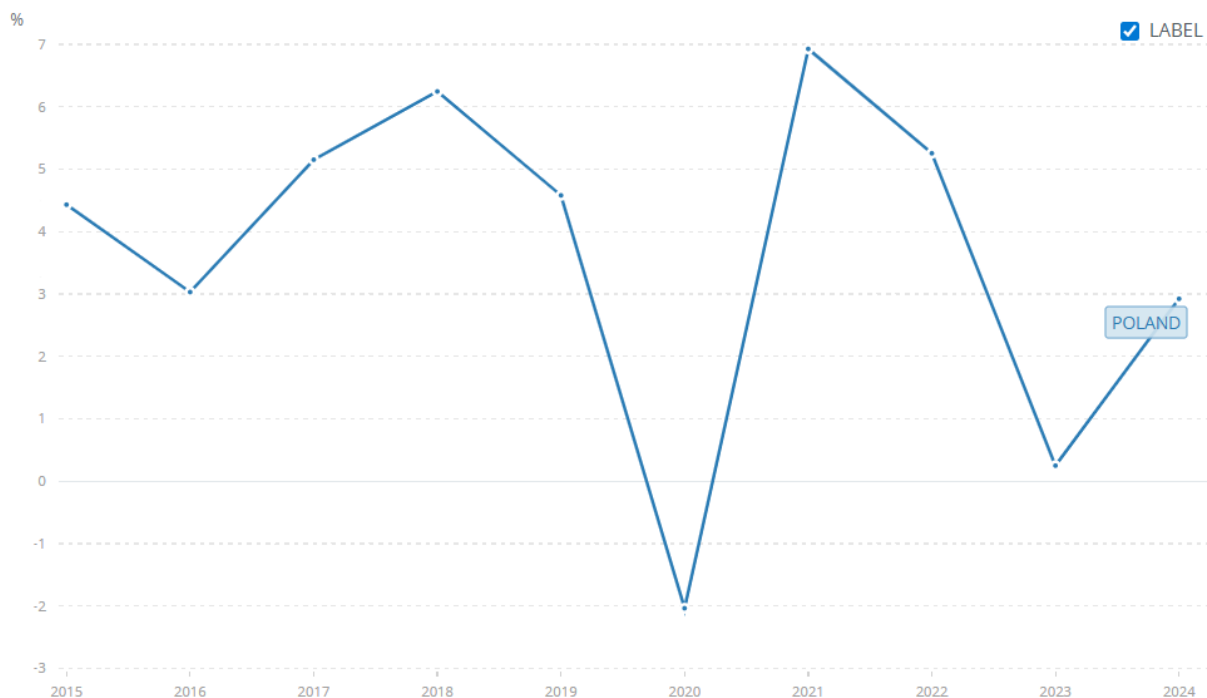
This section provides a concise overview of recent macroeconomic developments in Poland, focusing on those aspects that are directly relevant for understanding the country's evolving external and security-related positioning.

Poland's foreign policy orientations are shaped not only by security threats and external constraints, but also by material factors such as economic capacity, trade dynamics, and energy dependence. Examining quantitative indicators such as economic growth trends, per capita income evolution, foreign trade balance, and energy supply structure is crucial for understanding how the state responds to the international system. Geopolitical disruptions and energy crises in Europe, particularly in the post-2015 period, have led Poland to develop more initiative-taking strategies to reduce its economic vulnerabilities and diversify its foreign policy instruments. Developments in economic indicators form the material basis for many of the state's foreign policy choices, from its capacity to increase defence spending to its position in NATO.

Table 2: GDP growth (annual %) - Poland (2015-2024)

Year	Growth Rate
2015	4.4%
2016	3%
2017	5.2%
2018	6.2%
2019	4.6%
2020	-2%
2021	6.9%
2022	5.3%
2023	0.2%
2024	2.9%

Source: data.worldbank.org

Figure 1: Line Chart of Poland's GDP growth (2015-2024)

Source: data.worldbank.org

Poland's economic growth performance since 2015 demonstrates the strengthening of its resource-based capacity for foreign policymaking. Annual growth, which was 4.4% in 2015, reached 6.2% in 2018, the highest level of the period. This high growth momentum enabled the country to assume a more active role within NATO and the EU, particularly by increasing its defence spending. Despite a -2% contraction in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Poland demonstrated a rapid recovery of 6.9% in 2021. This rapid recovery demonstrates the state's fiscal and structural resilience to crises and strengthens its ability to act more autonomously in foreign policy.

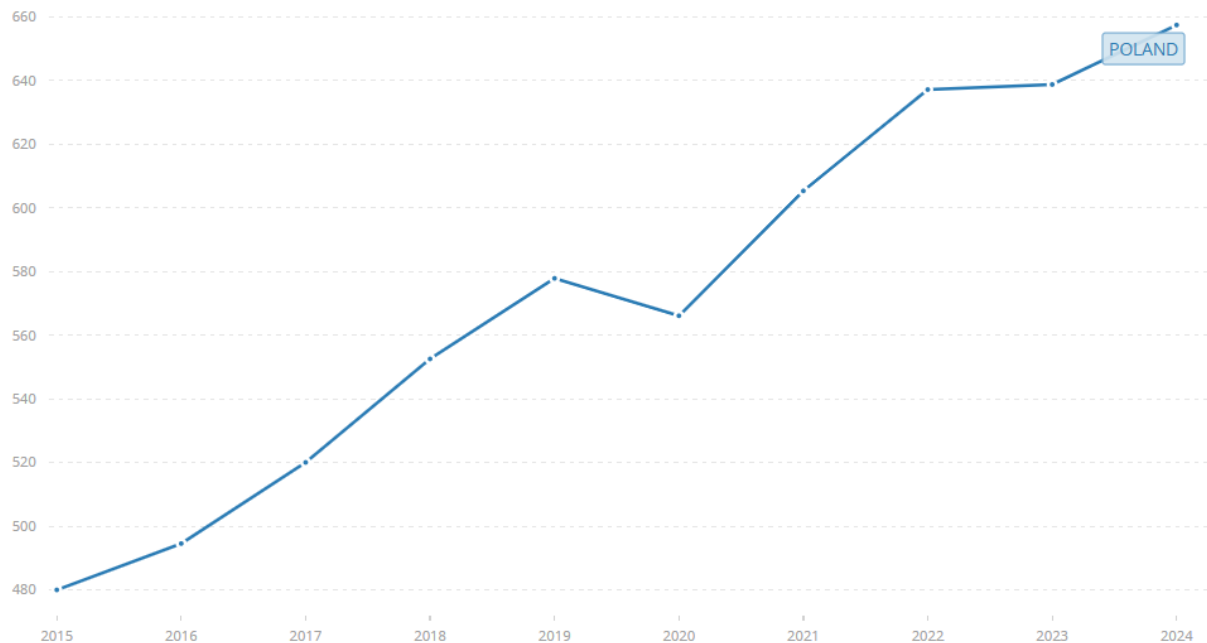
However, the drop in growth to 0.2% in 2023 clearly demonstrates the influence of the global economic slowdown, the energy crisis, and geopolitical uncertainties in Europe on the Polish economy. Such ruptures have led the country to reassess its foreign policy strategies and seek greater regional and transatlantic cooperation to offset economic risks. The 2.9 percent growth rate recorded in 2024 indicates that the economic recovery followed a limited but steady trajectory. This macroeconomic data demonstrates that Poland's foreign policy responses are directly linked not only to security threats but also to economic performance.

Table 3: GDP (constant 2015 US\$) - Poland (2015-2024)

Year	GDP (Billion)
2015	480.05
2016	494.61
2017	520.09
2018	552.57
2019	577.88
2020	566.12
2021	605.34
2022	637.15
2023	638.74
2024	657.41

Source: data.worldbank.org

Figure 2: Line Chart of GDP (constant 2015 US\$) - Poland (2015-2024)



Source: data.worldbank.org

The 2015-2024 period reflects a phase in which Poland's economic capacity strengthened quantitatively. GDP, measured at constant prices, stood at \$480 billion in 2015 and reached \$657 billion by 2024. This approximately 37% growth indicates a noticeable expansion in the country's fiscal and institutional capacity. The upward trend, particularly between 2017 and 2019, demonstrates that economic stability and domestic productivity improved, supporting foreign policy choices. Rising national income during this period enabled Poland to better fulfil its NATO obligations, increase defence spending on its eastern borders, and assume more assertive roles in regional initiatives.

Despite a brief downturn in 2020 due to the factors of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recovery continued remarkably in 2021 and beyond. GDP reached \$605 billion in 2021; Stability, maintained in 2022 and 2023. The \$657 billion level reached in 2024 indicates that the country will be able to use its financial resources more effectively through both military and diplomatic means. In this context, economic capacity demonstrates that, as predicted by neoclassical realism, internal state capacity, along with structural pressures, is a determining factor in shaping foreign policy decisions. In a region where Poland is geopolitically pressured, increased economic output enables decision-makers to develop more assertive and confident responses to external threats.

Table 4: GDP (constant 2015 US\$) - Poland (2000-2014)

Year	GDP (Billion)
2000	283.17
2001	286.67
2002	292.12
2003	302.41
2004	317.81
2005	328.17
2006	348.52

2007	372.08
2008	388.39
2009	398.55
2010	411.18
2011	432.79
2012	439.33
2013	442.34
2014	459.68

Source: data.worldbank.org

The 2000-2014 period reflects a transformative phase in Poland's economic development, laying the groundwork for the country's future integration into European and global markets. In 2000, GDP at constant 2015 prices were approximately \$283 billion, increasing steadily to \$460 billion by 2014, an expansion of over 62%. This sustained growth trajectory coincided with Poland's admission to the EU in 2004, which functioned as a catalyst for structural reforms, foreign direct investment, and infrastructure modernization. The years following EU membership (2004-2008) particularly witnessed rapid economic convergence, as Poland benefited from integration into the single market and cohesion funds.

The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 briefly disrupted this momentum; however, Poland remained the only EU country to avoid recession during that period. This resilience is evident in the upward GDP trend even during 2009-2010, underscoring a strong internal demand base and prudent macroeconomic management. From 2010 to 2014, GDP continued to rise, albeit at a slower pace, reaching \$459.7 billion by 2014. The stability in these years highlights Poland's growing fiscal maturity and institutional consolidation, which would later support more assertive economic and foreign policy strategies in the following decade.

Figure 3: Economic forecast for Poland

Indicators	2024	2025	2026
GDP growth (% , yoy)	2,9	3,3	3,0
Inflation (% , yoy)	3,7	3,6	2,8
Unemployment (%)	2,9	2,8	2,8
General government balance (% of GDP)	-6,6	-6,4	-6,1
Gross public debt (% of GDP)	55,3	58,0	65,3
Current account balance (% of GDP)	0,2	1,0	0,7

Source: European Commission

According to the European Commission's Spring 2025 Economic Forecast, the Polish economy expected to maintain a sturdy growth trend in 2025 and 2026. Real GDP, which grew by 2.9% in 2024, maintained its buoyancy, primarily driven by rising real wages, social assistance, and declining inflation, driven by private consumption. However, net exports had a negative impact on growth, and total investment declined due to a contraction in construction. Economic growth forecasted to rise to 3.3% in 2025, driven by a recovery in public investment, particularly supported by EU funds. Private consumption will also continue to contribute significantly during the same period. Growth is expected to slow to 3% in 2026, but this decline will be offset by a revival of both public and private investment, as this is the final year of the Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) funds, despite the slowdown in private consumption.

The negative impact of net exports on growth, expected to diminish further during this period (European Commission, 2025).

The labour market presents a stable outlook. While employment may decline in 2024, a plateau is projected in 2025 and a limited increase in 2026. Despite the decline in the population of working age, the labour force engagement rate remains historically high and this trend expected to continue. The unemployment rate projected to fall to 2.8% in 2026. Wage increases will also slow during the same period due to the decline in inflation and the slowdown in minimum wage increases.

On the inflation front, annual HICP-based inflation, anticipated to fall to 3.7% in 2024, then fall to 3.6% in 2025 and 2.8% in 2026. The decline in energy prices and the reduction in price pressures on imported goods is among the key factors supporting this trend. However, service inflation projected to decline more slowly due to wage pressures.

From a fiscal balance perspective, the general government budget deficit rose to 6.6% in 2024, explained by lower tax collections, public sector wage increases, and increased defence investments. While high public spending, expected to continue in 2025 and 2026, structural steps to broaden the tax base (e.g., SCT increases and freezing of income tax brackets) envisioned, along with gradual fiscal consolidation. Accordingly, the budget deficit, projected to decline to 6.4% in 2025 and 6.1% in 2026. However, the public debt-to-GDP ratio is on an upward trend, expected to reach 65.3% in 2026. Increased defence spending, public investments, and one-time transfers from the RRF will contribute to this increase (European Commission, 2025).

Taken together, these fiscal pressures constitute an important part of the economic context within which Poland's external positioning, particularly its reliance on EU recovery instruments and its defence-oriented alignment within NATO and the broader transatlantic framework, should be understood to have a better probable prospective.

Poland's Strategic Foreign Policy Objectives in the Post-Cold War Era

The downfall of the Cold War order in 1989 reshaped the international political landscape, providing Poland with an unprecedented opportunity to redefine its foreign policy priorities. Transitioning from a so called being the centre of Warsaw Pact as the Soviet satellite state to an independent sovereign national actor in the Europe. On the global stage, Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy goals such as its survival of "raison d'état" were deeply influenced by its divisions twice among the Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungarian empires through the historical experiences, geopolitical position, and the last Soviet invasions and all variations of penetrations and military incursions. After the Sinatra doctrine and Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika policies which also paved the way the Poland under Lech Walesa leadership with Solidarity Union to win the free elections by defeating the communist regime in 1989. Then to strengthen the independency of Poland, Lech Walesa being president of the state in 1990, who pursued to aspirations for integration into the political, security, and economic structures of the Western international systems.

Changes in the International System After the Cold War

Poland's transformation after the Cold War marked a critical turning point in its history. Emerging from many decades under Soviet influence, the country sought to assert its sovereignty, redefine its geopolitical position, and integrate into Western institutions. In the aftermath of the Cold War, Poland's foreign policy underwent profound changes. The year 1989 represented a major rupture in both Poland's domestic and foreign policy. During this time, Poland reshaped its foreign policy orientation in reaction to changes in the international system and domestic democratic transformations. The foreign policy, which Poland pursued a strategy

that both facilitated integration with the West and addressed national security needs (Sulowski, 2013, p. 23-26).

Poland's key strategic objectives during this period, shaped around two main axes: NATO membership and European Union integration. These goals defined the country's security and economic development priorities (Erler Bayır, 2011, p. 4). Joining NATO alleviated Poland's security concerns, while EU membership served as a vehicle for economic modernization and deeper integration with the West. With the end of the communist regime in 1989, Poland insisted on a process of integration with the Western world. During this period, the country's foreign policy priorities were defined by the dual objectives of ensuring national security and promoting economic development. Poland's democratization process progressed in parallel with its aspirations for NATO and EU membership. Notably, Poland's formal membership in NATO in 1999 and its EU membership in 2004 were critical steps that strengthened its stance on the international arena (Pugacewicz, 2022, p. 272-273).

The Pre-1989 Period and the Round Table Talks in the Historical Background of Democratic Transition and Political Reforms

During the communist era, Poland was under the influence of the Soviet Union. However, intense resistance from civil society, particularly the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) movement, paved the way for democratic transformation through the Round Table Talks in 1989. These negotiations resulted in the introduction of free elections and the reduction of the communist party's influence (Sulowski, 2013, p. 23-24).

The Round Table Talks held in Poland in 1989 were one of the most critical steps in the country's transition from authoritarian Soviet influence on a democratic regime and a market economy. These negotiations not only facilitated a political transformation but also formed the foundation for Poland's integration with the West and its alignment with the European Union (EU) accession process (Uğur & Doğan, 2017, p. 38-39). Meanwhile, it could have been also asserted that on Russia and Ukraine in their transitions to liberal free-market regimes, if there had been enough supports from the Western Institutions (IMF, World Bank, NATO, EU) two states would have improved their economic and political developments, too.

The Round Table Talks what were between the Polish United Workers' Party (PZPR) and the Solidarity Movement (*Solidarność*), with the good offices of the Catholic Church. During this process, the Solidarity Movement, led by Lech Wałęsa, forced the regime into negotiations through various strikes and protests. Notably, the strikes that began in the Gdańsk Shipyards in the 1980s, despite severe repression, became a turning point that pressured the transition to a multi-party system (Candan, 2014, p. 105-118). The talks resulted in the construction of a new political structure based on a bicameral parliament (Sejm and Senate), undermining the hegemony of the PZPR and resulting in the establishment of the first democratic government under the leadership of Tadeusz Mazowiecki, who was supported by Solidarity (Koçak & Genç, 2012, p. 840-842). The Round Table Talks framed critical steps that facilitated for multi-party democratic electoral processes and outlined the transformation of the state structure toward a market-oriented economy.

Following the Round Table Talks, Poland initiated significant reforms aimed at transforming its political system into a multi-party democracy. The initial partially free elections were in 1989, with Solidarity winning all Senate seats and securing a significant majority in the Sejm (Demir, 2015, p. 123-127). In 1990, Lech Wałęsa was Poland's first president to secure election via popular vote, and Poland adopted a semi-presidential system. The 1997 Constitution emphasized the rule of law, the separation of powers, and respect for fundamental rights, highlighting the democratic values of the West (Erdal & Çolakoğlu, 2007, p. 82-96).

Integration with the West and Compliance with the European Union

Poland's integration into the West became particularly evident in its relations with the European Union. After joining the Council of Europe in 1991, Poland committed to the principles of protecting fundamental human rights and freedoms. In its efforts to meet the Copenhagen Criteria, the country implemented a series of reforms aimed at strengthening democratic institutions, establishing a free-market economy, and guaranteeing the rule of law (Kutlu & Usta, 2013, p. 507-514). The Europeanization process also significantly influenced Poland's public administration system. Through decentralization and local governance policies, the administrative structure became more transparent and participatory. Notably, local government reforms constituted a crucial step in Poland's alignment with EU standards prior to full membership (Uğur & Doğan, 2017, p. 41). Throughout the 1990s, Poland's democratization process progressed through comprehensive reforms, including constitutional amendments, the transition to a market-oriented economy, and the formation of a stable political party system. The societal influence of the Catholic Church and the political transformation of the Solidarity movement were among the key factors shaping this period (Erler Bayır, 2011, p. 59-63).

The Geopolitical Significance of Poland's Foreign Policy

Poland's geographical location has historically subjected it to the influence of major powers such as Germany and Russia. These geopolitical realities have often posed challenges in shaping Poland's strategic priorities. However, in the post-Cold War era, Poland leveraged its geopolitical position to become a strategic partner for both NATO and the European Union (Pugacewicz, 2022, p. 261-262). The establishment of the Visegrad Group in 1991 was a significant step towards solidarity and integration among Central European countries. Poland's admission to NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004 demonstrated the successful implementation of its geopolitical strategy (Sulowski, 2013, p. 30). After joining the EU in 2004, Poland significantly benefited from EU funds, accelerating its economic development. Between 2007 and 2013, the country received €67 billion in EU funding, underscoring the success of this strategy.

Poland's relations with Germany also became a central element of its foreign policy during this period. The signing of the Poland-Germany Friendship Treaty in 1991 marked one of the most crucial post-war normalization steps between the two countries (Sulowski, 2013, p. 28-29). Following by the end of the Cold War, Poland sought a new direction in foreign policy to save its sovereignty, using its geopolitical position to deepen ties with Western alliances while strengthening regional cooperation. Poland's strategic location at the heart of Europe historically exposed it to external influences but also positioned it as a link between East and West. Moreover, NATO and EU membership emerged as Poland's primary foreign policy objectives (Zwolski, 2017, p. 168-173). Accession to NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004 brought Poland substantial security and economic benefits.

Since 2015, however, Poland has partially shifted away from its traditional pro-Western policies, adopting a foreign policy approach centred on regional leadership and national interests. Under the leadership of Jarosław Kaczyński and the Law and Justice Party (PiS), Poland has distanced itself from Germany and France while prioritizing stronger cooperation with Central European countries (Zwolski, 2017, p. 167-171).

Poland's Energy Independence and Diversification through LNG, Gas Imports, and Regional Energy Cooperation

Poland has shaped its energy policy by the goal of reducing its dependence on Russia. The country's energy security strategies encompass diversifying natural gas and oil supplies,

investing in renewable energy sources, and modernizing its energy infrastructure. Since 1989, Poland has designed its policy on energy by three main pillars: diversifying energy sources, reducing energy dependency, and improving infrastructure. As of 2020, 45% of Poland's gas demand has been meeting by Russia, but with the introduction of LNG terminals and projects like the Baltic Pipe, this percentage began to decrease (Voytyuk, 2022).

Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminals are a cornerstone of Poland's energy strategy. The LNG terminal in Świnoujście, which opened in 2015, has enabled Poland to import natural gas in liquid form from countries such as the U.S., Qatar, and Norway, significantly reducing its dependence on Russia. As of 2022, the capacity of the Świnoujście LNG terminal that increased to 6.2 billion cubic meters per year, with plans for further expansion in the coming years. The Baltic Pipe project is another key initiative strengthening Poland's energy security. This pipeline allows Poland to import natural gas directly from Norway via the North Sea. Launched in 2022, the project has the capacity to meet more than 50% of Poland's annual gas demand.

Poland is a leader in coal production in Europe, with approximately 70% of its electricity generated from coal. However, this situation conflicts with the European Union's green energy goals. To diversify its energy portfolio, Poland is investing in renewable energy sources. By 2030, the country aims to raise the share of renewables, such as wind and solar energy, to over 30% of total energy production. Offshore wind farms in the Baltic Sea stand out as one of the largest projects in this sector.

Poland places foremost importance on regional cooperation to ensure energy security. The energy summit held in Kraków in 2007 demonstrated Poland's ambition to assume a directive role in the regional energy sector. The summit's participating countries were such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Lithuania, leading to the signing of energy cooperation agreements among them (Zwolski, 2017, p. 172-175). Additionally, Poland plays an active role in projects aimed at developing energy infrastructure within the framework of the Three Seas Initiative. The initiative seeks to strengthen energy connections among Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries and diversify energy supply through LNG terminals. These efforts not only enhance Poland's energy independence but also aim to reduce the region's reliance on Russia.

Three Seas Initiative

The Three Seas Initiative (TSI) is a regional cooperation initiative launched in Dubrovnik in 2016 under the leadership of Poland and Croatia, with the participation of 12 EU member states surrounding the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas regions. The main goals of this initiative include strengthening energy infrastructure, establishing transport corridors, increasing digital connections, and deepening economic cooperation. Polish President Andrzej Duda sees this initiative as an opportunity to both accelerate regional development and achieve energy independence (Zwolski, 2017, p. 173-175). The importance of TSI in energy policies is particularly evident in LNG terminals and energy pipeline projects. Poland's Świnoujście LNG terminal and Croatia's LNG terminal on the island of Krk, stand out as the cornerstones of the initiative's energy infrastructure. It proposed that these terminals play a strategic role in the region's goal of reducing energy dependence on Russia. At the same time, energy interconnection projects developed under the leadership of Poland and Croatia aim to facilitate energy trade between CEE countries and increase energy supply security.

The initiative does not comprise only to energy infrastructure but also supports major projects in the field of transportation. North-South transport corridors aim to create strategic roads and railway networks from the Baltic Sea to the Adriatic and Black Seas. These projects increase the economic integration of the region and at the same time allow trade to take place

faster and more efficiently. Another important focus of TSI is increasing digital connections. Strengthening digital infrastructure contributes to the development of the IT sector in the region and accelerates data sharing between countries. This, in turn, enables greater cooperation, especially in the areas of cybersecurity and the digital economy. TSI has attracted the attention of not only regional but also international actors. The United States strongly supports the initiative and sees it as part of Europe's efforts to increase energy security and reduce dependence on Russia. The participation of U.S. President Donald Trump in the TSI Summit in Warsaw in 2017 was a clear indication of the support given to the initiative. In addition to the US, the European Commission also supports the initiative and provides financing for the projects. However, TSI has also faced with various criticisms. Western European countries, especially Germany and France, have expressed concerns that the initiative could create a new division within the European Union. However, TSI, led by Poland and Croatia, saw as a platform where CEE countries can defend their interests more strongly.

Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy has been determined by its geopolitical position, its energy policies and regional cooperation. The country has integrated into Western alliances through its NATO and EU memberships, but in recent years it has increased its cooperation with Central European countries by emphasizing its regional leadership goals. The Three Seas Initiative is a concrete example of this strategy for Poland and has immense potential in terms of energy independence and infrastructure development.

Fundamentals of Strategic Cooperation with the United States and US-Poland Relations in the Trump and Biden Era

Relations between Poland and the United States have gained a strategic dimension in the post-Cold War period and have deepened particularly in the 21st century. Poland's admission to NATO (1999) strengthened military cooperation with the U.S. and a strong defence partnership, established between the two countries (Tek, 2022, p. 28). The strategic cooperation between the US and Poland has developed in the fields of defence and security. Poland has become one of the most important allies of the US in Europe and has emerged as a critical actor in ensuring regional security, especially after Russia's invasion of Crimea (2014). In the context of reinforcing NATO's eastern flank, US troops deployed to Poland have been a crucial factor in terms of deterrence. Poland signed the "Enhanced Defence Cooperation Agreement" (EDCA) with the US in 2017, allowing the US to increase its military presence in the country. Under this agreement, military bases, built in Poland and thousands of U.S. troops which deployed. As of 2020, there were approximately 4,500 US troops in the country; however, this number that increased to 10,000 by the Biden administration in 2022.

The Donald Trump period (2017-2021) has brought both opportunities and challenges in US-Poland relations. Trump's request for NATO allies to spend more on defence as part of his "America First" policy has been one of the factors that positively affected Poland. Poland has earned the appreciation of the Trump administration as one of the NATO countries that spends more than 2% of its GDP on defence. The Trump administration has also increased cooperation with Poland in the field of energy, encouraging liquefied natural gas imports from the U.S. under LNG agreements. In 2019, the US sold a total of \$2 billion in LNG to Poland. In addition, the Trump administration decided to decrease the number of U.S. soldiers in Germany and supported Poland's proposal to host a US military presence.

The Joe Biden period (2021-2025), on the other hand, has reflected an effort to re-strengthen more traditional transatlantic ties. While the Biden administration focuses on strengthening relations with NATO and the EU, it has continued military cooperation with Poland. After Russia's military occupation of Ukraine in 2022, the US sent additional troops to Poland, deploying more than 10,000 soldiers in total (Tek, 2022, p. 22-35).

Poland has long demanded that the U.S. establish permanent military bases in the country. In 2018, Polish President Andrzej Duda proposed the building of a permanent U.S. military base in Poland during his meeting with Donald Trump at the White House. This project, called "Fort Trump", has become central to Poland's defence strategy. Duda stated that they could allocate a budget of \$2 billion to finance this project. However, according to the NATO-Russia Founding Act (1997), there are few restrictions on NATO establishing permanent large military bases on its eastern flank. For this reason, the "Fort Trump" proposal that could not be all implemented there, but in 2020, the US Department of Defence approved plans to establish a permanent US military presence in Poland (Tek, 2022, p. 28). In this context, new military facilities which established in the regions such as Powidz, Poznań and Drawsko Pomorskie, and the US military presence in Poland that became permanent. Poland has maintained strategic cooperation with the US for various years, and it is a crucial factor in the transatlantic partnership. While the Trump era was a period in which Poland increased its military and energy cooperation with the US, the Biden era accelerated the process of returning to the traditional NATO alliance. Although the "Fort Trump" proposal could be lesser implemented, the U.S. military employment in Poland that strengthened and created a critical deterrent element on NATO's eastern flank.

Foreign Policy during the Law and Justice Party Era and the Impact of Populist Policies

The political transformation that Poland underwent under the leadership of the Law and Justice Party (Prawo i Sprawiedliwość - PiS) in 2015 led to significant changes not only in domestic politics but also in foreign policy. PiS's populist, nationalist and Eurosceptic policies brought about a radical transformation in Poland's international relations, and this populist discourse influenced decision-making mechanisms in foreign policy and led to frictions in relations with the EU and the West (Zięba, 2022, p. 197-199). Under the Law and Justice Party, foreign policy became increasingly shaped by domestic political discourse emphasizing national sovereignty, historical victimhood, and resistance to external interference. These narratives framed the European Union and, at times, Germany as constraining actors, while portraying the United States and NATO as guarantors of Poland's strategic autonomy. As a result, Poland's foreign policy orientation did not shift away from the West entirely but rather evolved into a more selective and differentiated engagement, prioritizing security cooperation over normative integration.

PiS has shaped its foreign policy by populist discourses and nationalist rhetoric. The party has made a distinction between the "people" and the "elites" and has used this duality in foreign policy. PiS leaders have claimed that Poland, oppressed and exploited by these elites, especially by describing institutions and countries such as the EU and Germany. This discourse has led to the adoption of a populist language in foreign policy as well as in domestic policy. PiS's populism has manifested itself in foreign policy with its emphasis on national sovereignty and its discourse of "getting back from the knees" (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, p. 19-22). This discourse has worsened Poland's relations with the EU institutions and the West and has led to its efforts to enhance ties with NATO and the U.S.

- PiS has offered a "Fort Trump" military base to enhance military relations with the US and purchased \$4.75 billion worth of Patriot missiles (Zięba, 2022, p. 200-202). These policies have been criticized within the EU as a strategy isolating Poland.

- During the PiS period, Poland adopted a tough stance against Russia and played an active role in NATO's efforts to increase its presence in Eastern Europe. PiS tried to portray the 2010 Smolensk plane crash as a "Russian conspiracy", which further worsened relations with Moscow (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, p. 2).

Among the most significant obvious examples of PiS's populist foreign policy is its critical stance towards the EU. PiS portrayed the EU as a structure that threatened Poland's sovereignty and claimed which the EU viewed Poland as a "second-class" member. This discourse that has shaped as a defence mechanism, especially against the criticisms directed at Poland by the EU regarding its compliance with the principles of the rule of law (Zieba, 2022, p. 25). For instance, the EU Commission's investigation into Poland in 2017 for violating the principles of the rule of law, interpreted by PiS as "EU interference in Poland's internal affairs" and this situation was concerned to the public through populist discourses. Another important feature of PiS's populist foreign policy is the integration of historical discourse into foreign policy. PiS has used this historical narrative as a tool in foreign policy by constantly emphasizing Poland's victimization and heroism in World War II. This historical discourse has been frequently brought up, especially in relations with Germany and Russia. For example, the PiS government demanded World War II reparations from Germany and presented this demand as a continuation of Poland's historical victimization (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, p. 19-20). Similarly, in relations with Russia, events such as the Katyn Massacre and the Smolensk plane crash have become part of PiS's populist discourse.

Restructuring of Diplomatic Staff

After coming to power, PiS made radical changes in foreign policy, dismissed more experienced diplomats, and appointed more ideological and partisan staff.

- After 1989, PiS dismissed diplomats with the claim of purging diplomats "affiliated with the old regime" and replaced them with partisan names (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, p. 11-12).
- Following a policy of greater tension with the EU and Germany, PiS reduced the influence of independent foreign policy experts in the name of "national interest" (Zięba, 2022, p. 202-205).

With PiS coming to power, Poland's diplomatic staff underwent a significant restructuring process. This process, administered in the form of purging diplomats, especially those thought to have ties to the old communist regime, and appointing names that were in line with the party's ideological line. PiS called this process "cleansing the state of communist remnants" and stated that these steps were necessary to preserve Poland's independence and sovereignty (Zieba, 2022, p. 13-14).

This change in diplomatic staff was particularly evident in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MSZ). After coming to power, PiS dismissed more high-level diplomats from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and replaced them with people closer to the party's ideological line. For example, Witold Waszczykowski, who appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2015, implemented PiS's nationalist and Eurosceptic policies in foreign policy. Waszczykowski maintained a critical stance towards the EU throughout his term in office and instead of strengthening Poland's position within the EU, he pursued a more distant policy towards the EU (Zieba, 2022, p. 13-14). This change in diplomatic staff also influenced Poland's international relations. It has been observed that these new diplomatic staff displayed a harsher and more confrontational attitude, especially in relations with the EU and Germany. For example, Poland's opposition to the EU's refugee quotas in 2016 and the tension with Germany on this issue, perceived like a reflection of the attitude of PiS's diplomatic staff (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020).

Analysis of Tensions in Relations with the EU and the West

During the PiS period, Poland experienced serious tensions in its relations with the EU and the Western world. The basis of these tensions lies in PiS's critical stance towards the EU

and its criticisms of Poland regarding its compliance with the principles of the rule of law. In particular, the EU Commission's launching of an investigation into Poland in 2017 on the grounds that it infringed the principles of the rule of law further strained relations between the two parties (Zieba, 2022, p. 19-21).

These tensions with the EU are particularly related to the reforms made in Poland's judicial system. The PiS government, warned by the EU on the grounds that it weakened the independence of the judiciary with the reforms it made in the judicial system. The EU Commission stated that Poland disrupted the principles of the rule of law due to these reforms and called for sanctions against Poland. This process caused a serious deterioration in relations between Poland and the EU (Zieba, 2022, p. 23). In addition to the tensions with the EU, Poland's relations with Western states such as Germany and France, was also negatively influenced during the PiS period. In relations with Germany in particular, issues such as historical disagreements and World War II compensation have frequently come to the fore. The PiS government has demanded World War II compensation from Germany and presented this demand as a continuation of Poland's historical victimization (Cadier & Szulecki, 2020, 18-20). This has strained diplomatic relations between the two countries. From a neoclassical realist perspective, these tensions cannot be evaluated solely by institutional disputes or historical disagreements. Rather, domestic political discourse under the Law and Justice Party functioned as a key intervening variable shaping Poland's foreign policy behaviour. By framing EU legal oversight and relations with major Western states as threats to national sovereignty and historical justice, the PiS leadership translated systemic pressures into confrontational foreign policy choices. Consequently, domestic political considerations mediated Poland's engagement with the European Union and Western partners, reinforcing a selective, conflict-prone, yet strategically calculated foreign policy orientation.

In relations with France, disagreements in the field of defence have drawn particular attention. In 2016, Poland's cancellation of the agreement to purchase French-made Caracal helicopters has seriously damaged relations between the two countries. This cancellation decision has led France to adopt a negative attitude towards Poland and has strained diplomatic relations between the two countries (Zieba, 2022, p.18). During the period when the Law and Justice Party was in power, Poland's foreign policy has evolved into a populist, nationalist, and Eurosceptic stance. PiS's populist rhetoric has also manifested itself in foreign policy, and serious tensions have been experienced, especially in relations with the EU and the Western world. The restructuring of diplomatic staff has accelerated this process even further and caused a radical transformation in Poland's international relations. During the PiS period, Poland's foreign policy entered a period of serious isolation, especially in relations with the EU and the Western world. This process weakened Poland's situation within the international political arena and negatively affected the country's reputation among democratic countries. PiS's assertive populist and nationalist policies have put Poland's foreign policy in a difficult position in the long term and may cause a serious challenge to its status in balancing threats and benefiting of multiple interests through favouring the country's international versatile relations.

Article 7 of the EU Treaty and the Sanctions Mechanism Against Poland

The European Union (EU) considers it a fundamental value for member states to uphold the principles of the rule of law. However, the judicial reforms have been conducted in Poland since 2015 which has led to serious debate on the grounds that they violate the EU's rule of law principles.

Article 7 of the EU Treaty stipulates that sanctions should be imposed in the event of a serious breach of the EU's fundamental values by a member state. This article is particularly relevant in the event of a breach of the principles of the rule of law. The Beata Szydło government, which came to power in Poland in November 2015, has introduced a series of legal regulations that undermine the independence of the judiciary. These regulations include practices such as lowering the retirement age of Supreme Court judges and granting the head of state discretion in extending judges' terms of office.

The European Commission found these practices of Poland to be contrary to the EU's principles of the rule of law and launched a dialogue process called the "New EU Framework" on January 13, 2016. This process was framed as a soft dialogue mechanism before the harsh sanctions foreseen in Article 7 of the EU Treaty. However, as Poland did not respond positively to these calls for dialogue, the Commission initiated the sanctions mechanism under Article 7 of the EU Treaty on 20 December 2017 (Hummer, 2017, p. 32).

The European Arrest Warrant and the Right to a Fair Trial

The sanctions mechanism launched against Poland has led to serious legal problems, especially in the framework of the European Arrest Warrant (ATE). The ATE is a mechanism established to facilitate the extradition of criminals between member states. However, the lack of judicial independence in Poland has made the implementation of the ATE difficult. In its preliminary ruling application to the Court of Justice of the EU (ECJ) on 27 March 2018, the Irish Supreme Court questioned whether the lack of judicial independence in Poland violated the right to a fair trial (Arsava, 2021, p. 630-632).

In its decision on 25 July 2018, the ECJ stated that the implementation of the ATE could be postponed, but that this would require a two-stage review. In the first stage, it should be examined whether the member state that issued the ATE systematically disrupted the principles of the rule of law. In the second stage, the risk of a violation of the right to a fair trial in the specific case should be assessed. This decision revealed that the lack of judicial independence in Poland could hinder the implementation of the ATE.

The Case of Hungary and the EU's Attitude

Like Poland, Hungary has also been subject to the EU's sanctions mechanism for violating the rule of law principles. On 12 September 2018, the European Parliament decided to initiate an early warning mechanism against Hungary under Article 7 of the EU Treaty. This decision was based on the lack of judicial independence and the violation of fundamental human rights in Hungary (Hummer, 2017, p. 30-32).

In a case brought against Hungary, the ECJ assessed whether the conditions of detention posed a risk of inhuman or degrading treatment. The Court stated that the application of the ATE could be postponed if the conditions of detention were inadequate. This decision demonstrates the EU's determination to adhere to the rule of law principles, as in the cases of Poland and Hungary.

Brexit and the European Arrest Warrant

The Brexit process has also led to significant legal issues in the context of the implementation of the ATE. The Irish High Court has applied for a preliminary ruling on whether the ATE will apply if the UK leaves the EU. In its decision on 19 September 2018, the

ECJ stated that the ATE will continue to apply if the UK remains in the EU. However, uncertainties regarding the implementation of the ATE after Brexit continue.

The EU's commitment to the principles of the rule of law is significant in terms of the independence of the judiciary of the member states and the protection of fundamental rights. In the event of a violation of these principles, as in the cases of Poland and Hungary, the EU puts sanction mechanisms into effect. However, the legal discussions experienced during this process lead to serious problems, especially in the frame of the implementation of the ATE. While the decisions of the ECJ demonstrate the EU's determination to respect to the principles of the rule of law, uncertainties continue regarding how these principles will be applied in concrete situations.

Conclusion

Overall, the Polish case demonstrates that systemic incentives alone are insufficient to explain foreign policy outcomes without accounting for domestic, national, and regional political mediation. In line with neoclassical realism, internal political discourse, elite perceptions, and populist narratives under the Law and Justice Party significantly shaped how external pressures were interpreted and translated into foreign policy behaviours.

Poland's post-Cold War foreign policy represents a dynamic and multifaceted evolution shaped by both structural transformations in the international system and internal political developments. Initial efforts focused on securing first integration with NATO and later the European Union, enabling the country to consolidate its democratic institutions, modernize its economy, and enhance national security. These steps established Poland as a constructive member of the Euro-Atlantic community and a key regional actor in Central and Eastern Europe. Over time, Poland has broadened and diversified its strategic outlooks by emphasizing bilateral, regional and global cooperation, energy diversification, and transatlantic alignment, while also seeking to assert greater national autonomy in shaping multiple levels through systemic to the domestic structural changes, which also pushed it to maximize interests and to balance revisionist multiple security threats with quest for new international role.

In recent years, political shifts within the country have introduced new narratives centred on national identity, historical experience, and institutional sovereignty. These developments have led to nuanced debates regarding Poland's status and situation within the European Union and its vision for future cooperation. Rather than signalling a departure from Western integration, this evolving foreign policy reflects a recalibration of priorities in response to both domestic expectations and global uncertainties. Poland continues to navigate the complex and sophisticated balancing of interests and opportunities between its foundational commitments to Western alliances and its aspiration to play a more independent and influential role in regional and global affairs rather than classical balance of powers purity. Because of Poland's unique authentic structural historical security culture made the country so sensitive and vulnerable with the multiple level risks on state survival which is the different from the Western European Countries security cultures. Global warming, cyber terrorism, migration, energy, risk of globalisations, economic crises, trade, and financial wars with these are all conventional threats upon that Russia' direct revisionist territorial policies since Crimean occupation since 2014 imposes Poland into alarmingly to adopt new strategic alternative policies. We just refer a Polish student by quoting from Michael Roskin (Countries and Concepts, 2020) "I wish a country like Britain" who underlined the geopolitical tragedies of the Polish State fell, several times, under the German, Russian and Austrian invasions, who saved also the Europe against Ottomans.

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