



How to Make Europe Secure Again. Views from Germany and Poland

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Edited by Adam Balcer

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Introduction

Ukraine has been bravely fighting the Russian aggressor for four years now and is engaged in the biggest conflict in Europe since the Second World War and the largest ongoing war in the world. As a result of Donald Trump's return to the US presidency, the discussion on the outcome of the war and, by default, the future of Europe's security has resurfaced. The European Union and its member states seem to be aware of the new challenges and are stepping up their efforts, such as the establishment of the European Defence Fund and the approval of the largest-ever financial support loan for Ukraine, worth 90 billion EUR. However, the "extravagant" relationship between Donald Trump *et consortes* and Vladimir Putin and his siloviki poses a vital challenge for European leaders, who have lost the US as an ally in their condemnation of Russia's aggression towards Ukraine and financial aid for the Ukrainian war effort. While European public attention is focused on the course of the war in Ukraine, simultaneously important processes are unfolding in the Black Sea basin that will determine the future of the region. In the South Caucasus, Turkey is gaining influence after Azerbaijan's victory in the war for Karabakh, while the EU's role has decreased due to Georgia's authoritarian slide that has resulted in the suspension of Tbilisi's integration with the Union. On the other hand, Armenia announced that it will submit an application for EU membership in 2026, which will definitely face fierce opposition from Russia. Finally, Moldova and Ukraine have maintained an intensive pace to their European integration process.

Our report "How to Make Europe Secure Again. Views from Germany and Poland", a collection of articles written by prominent German and Polish experts, provides responses to the following fundamental questions:

- How are these crucial developments assessed from the perspective of Warsaw and Berlin?
- What is the perspective of Warsaw and Berlin on the challenges and opportunities?
- What strategies will Europe, Poland and Germany adopt to maintain a coherent policy towards Russia, Ukraine and the Black Sea without jeopardising an important ally such as the US?

The first part of our report takes an eagle's eye view of the current security situation in Europe and its implications for Germany and Poland. In her article "A New Turning Point in European Security: Where Do Poland and Germany Stand?", Aleksandra Koziol stresses that while the initial EU responses to the full-scale Russian invasion were unprecedented in scale, it was not until 2025 that lasting fundamental changes began to emerge. These were driven by a shift in US policies towards Eastern Europe. Against this backdrop, closer cooperation between Berlin and Warsaw could help address critical gaps in European defence capabilities. Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven, author of the next article, "Between MAGA and Russkiy Mir: Putin-Trump Relations and the Challenges for Europe", subscribes to Koziol's opinion concerning the importance of German-Polish cooperation for European security. However, according to him, "yet the alignment of Polish-German interests is barely matched by much needed concrete cooperation." The second block of our report

refers to the Black Sea as a core arena of strategic competition shaping Europe's security. Joanna Piechowiak's piece titled "The Black Sea is Back: Power Competition and Europe's Security Stakes", shows that there is a rising gap between EU ambition and the instruments it can deploy in the region. In her opinion, "Poland, as a coalition-builder within the EU and one of stakeholders in the region, needs to respond to this new reality with greater credibility and resilience." Meanwhile, Wilfried Jilge in his contribution, "Russia's Expansion Southward: The Strategic Importance of the Black Sea Region", analyses how the conquest of "Novorossiya" (Southern Ukraine) aims to completely cut off Ukraine from its Black Sea ports and remains the Kremlin's main war aim. This is because Russia wants to severely weaken or completely destroy Ukraine's sovereignty and the foundations of its economic independence. The last section of the report evaluates Ukraine's accession process. Igor Mitchnik's article, "From Compassion to Conditionality: Mapping German Attitudes Toward Ukraine's EU Membership", illustrates that Germany's support for Ukraine's integration with the EU remains steady – but has never meant a blank check for its accession. He reminds us that "as corruption scandals shake Kyiv and war fatigue sets in across Europe, Berlin is sending a quiet but unmistakable message: the path to EU membership runs through one inescapable standard – the Fundamentals." Finally, Paweł Chmieliński in his contribution, "Between the Market and the Community: Ukraine's Integration and the Future of European Agriculture", underlines that Ukraine's accession to EU agricultural policy constitutes much more than an accession process but also a test of whether Europe can act strategically in a world that no longer rewards hesitation. According to him, the outcome will depend not only on Kyiv's capacity to reform, but on the willingness of the EU Member States, and Poland above all, to treat Ukraine within the EU as an investment in their own future rather than a threat to their present.

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A New Turning Point in European Security: Where Do Poland and Germany Stand?

Aleksandra Koziol, PhD is a senior analyst at the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM). Her areas of expertise include European security and EU policy, as well as Russian domestic and foreign policy.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine came as a profound shock to European security. While the initial responses were unprecedented in scale, it was not until 2025 that lasting changes began to emerge, driven by a shift in US policies. Against this backdrop, closer cooperation between Poland and Germany could help address critical gaps in European defence capabilities.

Until recently, the European Union (EU) and its European allies viewed Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine as a clear turning point in the debate on the future of European security. However, a closer look at the evolution of the EU's defence agenda shows that this debate only truly gained momentum in the third year of the war. Prior to that, the EU response largely remained in crisis-management mode, with the primary focus on supplying Ukraine with weapons and ammunition. In this respect, the EU passed a major stress test. By the end of 2025, the total value of military support for Ukraine had reached almost 70 EUR billion (and 105 EUR billion in financial, economic, and humanitarian support), provided directly by Member States and the European Peace Facility, surpassing US support. In addition, more than 85,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been trained under the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM Ukraine).

A decisive shift

Despite Russia's continued war of aggression and its further escalation through an increasing number of hybrid attacks against European states since 2022, defence cooperation among Member States initially changed little. A decisive shift came at the beginning of 2025 with Donald Trump's inauguration, which brought a recalibration of US foreign and security policy and renewed expectations that Europe would assume greater responsibility for its own security. This external push, combined with a growing European assessment of declining US policy predictability, prompted the EU and its Member States to reconsider their defence strategy—not merely to reach consensus on threats, but to develop a comprehensive response to them.

It was only from 2025 onwards that the EU's responses evolved from emergency measures into initiatives designed to endure beyond the immediate crisis and produce genuine structural change. This was characterised by a shift towards permanent institutional arrangements and sustained financial instruments, as well as the integration of defence production and capability development into core EU policies. The new European Commission that took office at the end of 2024 for the 2024–2029 mandate appointed for the first time a Commissioner for Defence and Space. In March 2025, the Commission announced the ReArm Europe Plan, which emphasised the need for increased defence investment. In addition to that,

the Commission seeks to stimulate deeper defence cooperation among Member States. This is clear both in military terms—through the White Paper for European Defence – Readiness 2030 (published in March 2025) and the Defence Readiness Roadmap 2030 (October 2025)—and in civilian preparedness through the EU Preparedness Union Strategy (March 2025).

A major focus was placed on strengthening the European Defence Technological and Industrial Base (EDTIB), notably by increasing weapons and ammunition production and improving the integration of the European defence market.¹ The Commission proposed prioritising the development of common capabilities in areas such as air and missile defence, strategic enablers, military mobility, artillery systems, cyber and electronic warfare, missiles and ammunition, drones and counter-drones, ground combat capabilities, and maritime security. To support this effort, Member States were expected to establish Capability Coalitions in each of these priority areas. In parallel, they were encouraged to launch European Readiness Flagships, including the Eastern Flank Watch, the European Air Shield, the European Space Shield, and the European Drone Defence Initiative. While these initiatives are explicitly complementary to NATO, they nevertheless represent an ambitious step towards a more coherent and autonomous European defence posture that goes beyond the common market.

Between Shared Competences and Diverging National Policies

The EU's Security and Defence Policy is undergoing a process of structural transformation. The combined pressure of Russia as a security threat, its war against Ukraine, and changes in US foreign and security policy has shifted the focus of policy-making from ad hoc crisis management to more permanent institutional and policy arrangements. In this context, long-standing differences among Member States—regarding defence priorities and the balance between national sovereignty and EU-level action—have come sharply into focus, shaping the prospects and limits of deeper European defence integration.

After decades of underinvestment, significant capability gaps must be closed across Europe if defence and deterrence are to remain credible. This task confronts every European state. Yet threat assessments in national capitals continue to diverge, with geographical proximity (North-Eastern Europe) to Russia still playing a decisive role, even though the growing number of hybrid attacks has blurred traditional distinctions. These differences have far-reaching practical consequences. Poland and Germany illustrate two ends of the spectrum. In 2025, Poland spent around 4.5% of its GDP on defence, with almost 55% allocated to equipment, while Germany assigned for that goal 2% of GDP—meeting the NATO 2014 benchmark only the previous year—with roughly 20% devoted to equipment.²

In response, the Commission has opted for a common approach, which has begun to yield tangible results. The SAFE (Security Action for Europe) instrument, which provides 150 EUR billion long-maturity loans for joint procurement, is a prime example of collective effort. Supported by deregulatory initiatives, including the Omnibus package and measures on military mobility, it is aimed at facilitating defence production

1 Aleksandra Kozioł, *The New EU Defence Agenda: Moving Towards a Single Market for the Arms Sector*, PISM Report, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych, November 2025, <https://pism.pl/publications/the-new-eu-defence-agenda-moving-towards-a-single-market-for-the-arms-sector>.

2 *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2025)*, Press Release, NATO, <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/finance/def-exp-2025-en.pdf>.

and operational cohesion across Europe.³ At the same time, Ukraine has been brought into the European defence market—a tectonic shift that extends common financing mechanisms to a non-EU state and aims to provide Ukraine with sustainable capabilities, reducing its reliance on external deliveries. Together, these developments demonstrate the EU at its most effective: using financial and legal instruments to encourage Member States to contribute more to common security and defence.

Yet the future of Europe's defence potential remains uncertain. Diverging national interests are once again beginning to undermine the rearmament process. Frictions have emerged around the recent Commission's proposals that some Member States wish to keep strictly intergovernmental, weakening the prospects for a genuinely common response. Consequently, Capability Coalitions remain largely unformed, and only the Eastern Flank states during the summit in Helsinki in December 2025 declared their willingness to cooperate on two of the four European Readiness Flagships. This highlights the significantly greater sense of threat among Nordic, Baltic, and certain Central European states—including Poland—but not Germany.

Finally, European states must guard against becoming victims of their own success. Strengthening the European defence market could antagonise the US, which aims to maintain high levels of direct arms sales to European states and, through the Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL), to Kyiv.⁴ Donald Trump's transactional economic logic could backfire if "buy European" policies are perceived in Washington as protectionist, which could affect broader US policy choices, including engagement in negotiations over a peace settlement in Ukraine. This would require substantial European diplomatic effort and negotiating skill. In this context, both Poland and Germany are seeking to maintain close engagement with the US and view this period of managed friction as a time when European consolidation and US strategic interests still intersect, rather than seeing it as an inevitable rupture in the transatlantic relationship.

What can Poland and Germany Do?

Poland and Germany have a shared strategic assessment. They both agree on the fundamental issues, such as the threat posed by Russia, the importance of supporting Ukraine, and the necessity of maintaining a robust transatlantic relationship. Neither country wants the US to disengage from Europe, either strategically or operationally—particularly given that both states host some of the largest American troop deployments on the continent, which play a significant deterrent role vis-à-vis Russia, especially from the Polish perspective.

At the same time, important differences emerge in how this shared strategic assessment is translated into national policies and capabilities. Poland is rapidly

³ *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council. Defence Readiness Omnibus*, European Commission, 17.06.2025, https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b2bcc9a0-5259-4543-9e1c-3af1dde8fbec_en?filename=Defence-Simplification-Omnibus.pdf. *Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Military Mobility*, European Commission, 19.11.2025, [https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a5b639aa-4d77-44b8-9f98-6bc0e54be984_en?filename=Joint communication on Military Mobility.pdf](https://defence-industry-space.ec.europa.eu/document/download/a5b639aa-4d77-44b8-9f98-6bc0e54be984_en?filename=Joint%20communication%20on%20Military%20Mobility.pdf).

⁴ This mechanism was created following the Trump administration's decision to stop providing Ukraine with weapons. A \$500 million package is being funded jointly by Germany, Norway and Poland. *NATO Allies and partners fund over 4 billion in PURL packages for Ukraine*, NATO, 10.12.2025, <https://www.nato.int/en/news-and-events/articles/news/2025/12/10/nato-allies-and-partners-fund-over-4-billion-in-purl-packages-for-ukraine>.

increasing its defence spending and has demonstrated strong political determination to close capability gaps, including by participating in European Readiness Flagships. Germany, by contrast, is moving more slowly in these areas. Structural differences in the defence industrial base further shape national approaches. Poland's sector is dominated by small and medium-sized enterprises, which reinforce an emphasis on developing domestic production capacity. At the same time, Germany's large defence companies are better positioned to benefit from rising EU-level spending and to strengthen their role in the emerging European defence market.

These differences should not, however, hinder bilateral cooperation. Closer alignment between Poland and Germany could, in fact, facilitate the launch of initiatives to bolster the entire European defence and deterrence. This would also reflect their combined capacity to influence outcomes at the EU level. Several concrete steps could be taken to this end.

First, bilateral dialogue at the governmental level should be sustained and intensified in order to overcome misunderstandings and foster greater alignment at the operational level.

Second, both countries should engage in concrete military projects that deliver mutual benefits. They should start with a review of existing initiatives, with the aim of improving coordination and ensuring stronger and more consistent political commitment on both sides.

Military mobility offers particular potential in this regard, including joint investment in land and sea infrastructure and storage facilities, as well as support for training activities to test border procedures. This cooperation must be closely linked to the implementation of NATO Defence Plans in order to strengthen defence and deterrence on the eastern flank. In this context, Germany can provide strategic depth, while Poland can function as a key logistical hub enabling the rapid deployment of allied forces, including Germany's brigade stationed in Lithuania.

Third, Poland and Germany should initiate a dialogue on shaping the European defence market in a way that reflects both geographical and structural diversity. This could result in joint armament projects, including technology sharing, which would accelerate the closing of capability gaps by facilitating the procurement, modernisation, and refurbishment of military equipment needed in both countries.

Fourth, addressing gaps in air and missile defence remains a critical challenge at the European level. Poland and Germany could expand their cooperation to include joint airspace security and surveillance systems, as well as counter-drone capabilities. Existing initiatives, such as the deployment of German fighter jets to Malbork for NATO's Eastern Sentry mission, could be built upon. Cooperation could also be extended to selected areas of military air transport.

Fifth, Russia's increasingly hostile activity in the Baltic Sea has heightened security challenges along the eastern flank. As both Germany and Poland share a coastline, it would be advisable to invest in port infrastructure and its protection, particularly to support NATO logistics and reinforcement efforts.

Finally, both states should coordinate their efforts to integrate the Ukrainian defence sector into the European defence market. This can be done through establishing joint ventures involving all three countries. This would create more sustainable mechanisms for military support than ad hoc deliveries of weapons and ammunition on a decision-by-decision basis. In parallel, both states should continue to supply military equipment from their own production lines without placing political limitations on the types of systems provided (like Taurus cruise missiles).

Between MAGA and *Ruskiy Mir*: Putin–Trump Relations and the Challenges for Europe

Arndt Freytag von Loringhoven is a former German Ambassador to Poland and vice-president of the German foreign intelligence service. In 2024, he published the book “Putins Angriff auf Deutschland: Desinformation, Propaganda, Cyberattacken”.

Faced with Russia’s neo-imperialism and the unreliability of MAGA-America, Germany and Poland share the same strategic interests: Europe must become more sovereign and independent, the United States should remain engaged in Europe, and Ukraine must win the war. Yet the alignment of Polish–German interests is barely matched by much needed concrete cooperation.

Russia has re-emerged since 2022 as an existential danger for Europe. Hundreds of thousands have lost their lives in Moscow’s brutal war against Ukraine and there is no indication Moscow may be ready for compromise to end the killing. It continues to believe that it will win a war of attrition. Moreover, a European war extending beyond Ukraine can no longer be excluded. Moscow’s increasingly aggressive posture is driven by revisionism and imperial ambitions whose limits are unclear—the Baltic states, Poland, even Germany? The Kremlin’s ultimate aims are unknown. But its war economy is in full swing, enabling it to manufacture 1,000 to 1,500 tanks every year. This number is approximately double the combined tank production of the five largest European nations.⁵ Moscow has also gained cutting-edge fighting experience in Ukraine and produces state-of-the-art drones. According to German foreign intelligence, Russia will be capable of attacking NATO in 2029. Moscow’s hybrid attacks against Poland have intensified and only thanks to luck and incompetence have mass casualties so far been avoided. Despite heavy losses in Ukraine and the growing impact of sanctions on Russia’s economy, the Putin regime remains in control. There is no reason to expect regime change anytime soon. As a result, we have to brace for a prolonged period of intense aggression.

Europe confronts an unprecedented double challenge

At the same time, the United States—the guarantor of European peace for eight decades—has become an unreliable ally. The so-called “peace plan” for Ukraine negotiated in late 2025 between US special envoy Steve Witkoff and Russia’s Dmitrij Kiselev demonstrated this in a dramatic fashion. A largely Moscow-drafted proposal was repackaged by the US as its own initiative, massively favouring the aggressor rather than supporting and protecting the attacked country. Washington seems focused on ending the war soon, clearing the way for lucrative business and energy

⁵ Mariam Matchavariani, *Russia Is Significantly Outpacing the EU in Its Tank Production, Says German MOD*, United 24 Media, 06.12.2024, <https://united24media.com/latest-news/russia-is-significantly-outpacing-the-eu-in-its-tank-production-says-german-mod-4272>

deals for America. Washington deliberately keeps Europe out of peace negotiation. This is despite the fact that Europeans now almost single-handedly shoulder military and financial support to Ukraine and therefore should be “at the table”, as Polish⁶ and German politicians unanimously underlined at the Munich Security conference (MSC) in February 2026. In its new national security strategy, Washington is concerned with “civilizational erasure” in Europe and intends to help far right parties gain power. President Trump threatened to annex Greenland, a territory belonging to Denmark, a staunch European ally. Secretary Rubio’s speech at the MSC appeared to send a friendlier message, but it was no different in substance from Trump or Vance. America offers Europe partnership, but only on the terms of MAGA (Make America Great Again).

For US President Donald Trump, the national interest strongly prevails over international commitments. This includes solidarity with NATO Allies, the bedrock of Europe’s security. America’s willingness to leave European security to Europeans has strongly intensified. While the United States seems unlikely to withdraw from NATO altogether, it aims for a “re-balancing” of the Alliance. Americans profess to maintain the umbrella of strategic nuclear arms over Europe, but they have announced their intent to leave conventional defence largely to Europeans. Consequently, significant troop reductions (with Poland as a possible exception) are expected. While this can be probably be dealt with, the real issue is Article V, NATO’s solidarity commitment which no longer appears “ironclad”. The US Secretary of State Marco Rubio did not mention it once – or NATO for that matter – in his Munich speech. It appears that the Trump administration is favouring a transactional approach to Article V, making it conditional on the level of defence spending or specific EU regulation of US social media platforms.⁷ The result is insecurity and a loss of trust. As a recent wargame⁸ conducted by the German daily Die WELT has shown, the readiness of the US to “die for Suwałki” – at least that is how it is perceived in Germany – is less certain than ever.

US policy towards Ukraine has become erratic and unpredictable. Washington no longer defends international law (the inviolability of borders) and the international security order. Prospects of a Nobel Peace Prize or prestigious and lucrative peace deals with Moscow seem to be the focus for Trump and his administration. All in all, relations between the US and Europe are clearly in a crisis. The US have marginalised the EU in international diplomacy (Ukraine, Gaza), introduced aggressive tariffs, and threatened to annex European territory. They have launched a culture war and are openly supporting radical right, Eurosceptic and often pro-Russian politicians across Europe. All these negative dynamics are highly welcomed by Moscow. The escalating Russian threat, the weakening of the transatlantic bond and the risk of losing cohesion within the Alliance put Europe’s security in greater jeopardy than at any time since 1945.

6 Francine Lacqua and Maxim Edwards, *Poland’s Sikorski says Europe deserves role in Ukraine talks*, Bloomberg, 16.02.2026, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2026-02-13/europe-deserves-role-in-ukraine-talks-poland-s-sikorski-says>

7 *J.D. Vance drohte NATO-Staaten bei Vorgehen gegen Musks X*, NTV Politik, 9.11.2024, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Wird-Unterstuetzung-entzogen-JD-Vance-drohte-Europas-NATO-Mitgliedern-bei-Vorgehen-gegen-Elon-Musks-Plattform-X-article25350151.html>

8 *Deutschland versteht strategische denke des Kremels nicht*, Podcast Ernstfall, Die Welt, 8.02.2026 <https://www.welt.de/politik/video6988645000d739e7f4059bb9/podcast-ernstfall-verstanden-dass-deutschland-diese-strategische-denke-des-kremels-nicht-versteht.html>

Europe must become sovereign–ASAP!

Public opinion polls reflect the decline in the transatlantic relationship. A large majority of Germans holds an unfavourable view of President Donald Trump. 61% of Germans view Trump as a threat to Germany, while only 24% see him as an ally.⁹ At the Munich Security Conference, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz set the tone by acknowledging a rift between Europe and the US and called for a more sovereign and independent Europe.

Poland has long been a staunch and trusting ally of the US. But in a recent poll only 30% of Poles considered America a reliable ally.¹⁰ For the Polish far right, Trump has traditionally been the preferred partner in the Western world. However, some Trump’s aggressive behaviour, particularly on Greenland, has given rise to doubts even amongst some Polish nationalists. In the present situation, the Polish government, like that in Germany, is seeking a balance between the US and Europe, stressing its continued interest in the transatlantic partnership while working towards a stronger, more independent Europe. In tone and substance, Polish PM Donald Tusk and FM Radosław Sikorski’s interventions at the MSC were on the same wavelength as Merz’s speech.

The consequences of these developments are obvious: Europe needs to become more self-reliant, less dependent on the United States, and more sovereign, particularly in defence and technological innovation. Three priorities stand out:

First, Europe must help Ukraine win.

Europe owes this to the Ukrainian people and to its own security interests. As Russia continues to show zero readiness for compromise, the fighting will likely go on. Ukraine will continue to depend on Western support. As US assistance falters, Europe must increase its military and financial aid. With Ukraine’s NATO accession ruled out by Trump, its rapid and smooth integration with the EU becomes a strategic priority.

Second, Europe must build sovereign defence capabilities–without alienating the United States.

This will mean strengthening the European pillar within NATO, without creating rival European capabilities. European defence cooperation must be deepened, with priority given to the Eastern Flank. We have reached a stage where de-risking from the US has become a necessity. A crucial part of this is overcoming the dependence on US strategic enablers (intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, air transport, satellites). France and the UK should extend nuclear protection to additional European partners. Defence aside, Europe must urgently strengthen its own capabilities in the digital field, especially in artificial intelligence and quantum computing.

Third, European cohesion is indispensable.

No single European state is strong enough to withstand pressure from Russia or the United States alone. Such strength should ideally come from the EU as

⁹ Umfrage: 61% sehen Trump als Bedrohung für Deutschland, FOCUS online, 25.01.2026,

¹⁰ Poles have spit and soured on America, The Economist, 19.2.2026, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/02/19/peles-have-split-and-soured-on-america>

a bloc together with European NATO allies (the UK and Norway). But there are alternatives if unanimity cannot be reached. A coalition led by Germany, Poland, France, the UK and further European states could form the backbone of efforts to strengthen European defence, bolster digital capabilities, and support Ukraine.

Poland and Germany: Missed opportunities and new imperatives

Poland and Germany are central to Europe's strategic posture. Their support (military, economic, logistical) is crucial for Ukraine to survive. Geography places them at the centre of any potential conflict with Russia. Their political and economic weight makes them natural leaders in building European resilience. Poland and Germany will have the biggest land forces in the EU. They can act bilaterally, through the Weimar Triangle (with France), or within broader coalitions. Conversely, a divergence between Warsaw and Berlin – with Poland leaning toward the US and Eastern and Northern Europe, while Germany toward Western Europe – might create a dangerous fault line in Europe.

The good news is that at this crucial point in history, Germany and Poland share the same core interests: Europe must become more sovereign in defence and in the digital sphere, the United States should remain engaged in Europe's security as much as possible, and Ukraine must prevail and ultimately win. The strategic assessments and perceptions of Germany and Poland have inched closer together. Russia's full-scale invasion has markedly shifted German views. Like Poles, most Germans now regard Russia as a major threat. Germany has joined NATO's new commitment to spend 5% of GDP on defence. Poland, like Germany, aspires to a rebalancing in NATO with a stronger European role.

The bad news is that despite this remarkable convergence, the Polish-German relationship has not significantly improved. Although both countries presently have governments led by conservative leaders, they have been slow to embrace closer cooperation. Difficult issues—reparations, migration—continue to dominate public discourse and impede progress. Trust has not been recovered. Setbacks include Berlin's opposition to co-finance Poland's fortifications of NATO's Eastern border, Warsaw's rejection of Germany's offer to pay 200 million Euros to survivors of Germany's occupation, and Poland buying a Swedish rather than a German submarine. The latest German-Polish Barometer¹¹ shows declining Polish sympathy toward Germany, even as Germans increasingly admire Poland's modernisation.

The past two years have been a period of missed opportunities. Both sides bear responsibility for this issue. Too often domestic politics have taken precedence over strategic necessities. Under constant pressure from the Polish far right, Prime Minister Tusk has been reluctant to forge closer ties with Germany. Berlin, despite calling Warsaw an indispensable partner, has not fully made Warsaw a strategic priority, as was reflected in an ill-timed push back of migrants to Poland, slow progress on the planned memorial dedicated to Polish victims of Nazi Germany, and the absence of any significant security initiatives. The latest two rounds of state consultations have produced little more than declarations of intent.

¹¹ Jacek Kucharczyk, Agnieszka Łada-Konefał, *Gemeinsame Herausforderungen, unterschiedliche Sichtweisen. Deutsch-Polnisches Barometer 2025*, 24.11.2025, <https://www.deutsch-polnisches-barometer.de/de/publikation/gemeinsame-herausforderungen-unterschiedliche-sichtweisen-deutsch-polnisches-barometer-2025>

The result is a significant gap between the alignment of strategic interests and a lack of concrete cooperation to underpin them. This is not only disappointing in a bilateral context. Europe can simply not afford a Polish-German stalemate, given the very real threats to the continent's security. One cannot but wonder why there is not a greater sense of urgency given that the next elections may bring the Polish far right back to power. This would likely close the current window of opportunity for a rapprochement and joint security initiatives with Germany.

No time to lose

Against this background both governments would be well advised to focus on strategic priorities and develop concrete initiatives, especially in the following areas:

- Defence cooperation: jointly work towards a "drone wall" on Europe's Eastern border; foster cooperation in drone production; enhance protection of the Baltic Sea (air policing, underwater security, countering Russia's shadow fleet); and improve military mobility in the centre of Europe. Hopefully, concrete cooperation projects can be included in the bilateral defense agreement which is planned to be concluded this year.
- Countering hybrid threats: given their support for Ukraine and their commitment to rearming their own countries, Poland and Germany have become priority targets across the entire spectrum of Russia's hybrid war (disinformation, sabotage, cyber attacks, drone incursions etc.). Warsaw and Berlin have begun to step up efforts to counter Moscow's hybrid attacks. But these efforts are insufficient to raise the costs for the adversary. Deterrence does not work. A new mindset must be developed to counter hybrid warfare more effectively. Purely reactive measures to protect our democracy and critical infrastructure will not be enough. An inclusive approach involving both the whole of government and society is needed to mirror Moscow's attacks. Pro-active, offensive strategies in cyber and information campaigns should be developed and included in our toolkit. European democracies should develop a counter hybrid deterrence doctrine. Poland and Germany, together with France, the United Kingdom and other countries should spearhead this endeavour.
- A redesigned enlargement process for Ukraine: Poland and Germany should coordinate military aid, strengthen Ukraine's defence industry, and continue to provide financial support (this will sooner or later necessitate coming back to the project of a reparations loan). But there is one elephant in the room. Ukraine's EU accession has so far progressed swiftly. There is, however, a danger that this process will slow down. Issues such as agriculture or the EU's solidarity clause, article 42(7) of the EU treaty, will be extremely hard to manage and risk derailing the entire accession process. It is therefore wise that the European Commission (EC) has started developing ideas¹² on a reformed, more flexible accession procedure, which could bring Ukraine (and potentially other acceding countries like Moldova or the Western Balkans) into the EU at

¹² Zoya Sheftalovich, *5 steps to get Ukraine into the EU in 2027*, Politico, 10.02.2026, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-steps-ukraine-eu-membership-2027/>

an early stage. This could happen perhaps as early as 2027, as suggested by the US as part of their peace plan. An accelerated accession might offer new members better access to EU funds and an observatory role in EU institutions, while prolonging restrictions such as the suspension of voting rights, extended transition periods, access to EU funds and the single market, or rule of law conditionality. Germany and Poland should jointly support the EC's initiative to develop a new, more flexible approach on enlargement, which would enable an early extension of the EU's security umbrella to Ukraine.

Urgently create a fund for Polish victims: for years there has been no progress on this issue, although most of the approximately 50.000 survivors are now very old. An offer made by Germany in 2024 (200 million Euro) was rejected by Prime Minister Tusk. The sum was seen as too low and the plan to reach a three-pronged agreement on compensations, the planned Polish memorial in Berlin, and an investment in Poland's security failed. Meanwhile, Polish victims are still waiting for overdue compensations. It is high time to finally focus on these victims. There is no time to lose. Germany should decouple the fund from other issues and go ahead with its creation even if some in Poland will deem its volume insufficient.

The Black Sea is Back: Power Competition and Europe's Security Stakes

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The Black Sea and the South Caucasus have re-emerged as a core arena of strategic competition shaping Europe's security. Russia's war against Ukraine, a shift in regional power balances, and contested connectivity corridors are exposing a gap between EU ambition and the instruments it can deploy. Poland as a coalition-builder within the EU and one of the stake holders in the region needs to respond to this new reality with greater credibility and resilience.

Over the last few years, the Black Sea and the South Caucasus have come back to the centre of European strategic debate. Overlapping crises drive this renewed attention: Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Azerbaijan's victory in the war with Armenia, and Georgia's democratic backsliding, resulting in the pause of its integration process with the EU. At the same time, the region has become more tightly connected to broader questions of European security—energy diversification, transport corridors, and the resilience of NATO's eastern flank. These dynamics raise a practical policy question: can the European Union—and member states with strong eastern-policy traditions such as Poland—respond with instruments that match the speed and scale of regional change?

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The Black Sea security environment after 2022

The Black Sea and the neighbouring South Caucasus combine strategic value with structural instability. Geographically, they sit at the Eurasian crossroads of Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Politically, they remain exposed to unresolved conflicts, contested borders, and the legacies of state-building that started after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result, the region functions as a contact zone for the interests of Russia and Turkey, the policies of the EU and the United States, and—more recently—China's mostly infrastructure—and logistics-driven engagement.

From the early 2000s onward, Western engagement in the broader Black Sea space often appeared uneven: strong in diplomacy and development instruments, but weaker in hard security and crisis prevention. After the Russia–Georgia war (2008) and the annexation of Crimea (2014), the West relied primarily on political condemnation, sanctions, and limited reassurance measures. Whether sanctions are judged “effective” depends on the benchmark used. What can be stated more cautiously is that these responses did not reverse territorial changes or eliminate Moscow's ability to project power in the region.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 altered operational realities in the Black Sea. Ukraine demonstrated that Russian freedom of action could be contested through asymmetric means and long-range capabilities, and that Moscow could no longer treat the maritime domain as a stable Russian-controlled rear area. The Black Sea thus became not only a theatre of military activity but also a space where broader questions—the safety of sea lines of communication and trade routes, risks to infrastructure, and escalation management—directly affect European security.¹³

This shift also increased the strategic relevance of the South Caucasus as a land corridor connecting the Black Sea to Central Asia and to the Middle East. Connectivity projects—ports, rail links, roads, energy infrastructure, and digital networks—carry geopolitical weight because they shape dependencies and determine which actors can set rules and standards. In this setting, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan are not merely passive objects of competition; each seeks to use regional reconfiguration to advance its own agenda, though with very different capacities and constraints.

China's expanding role through infrastructure investment and logistics projects adds a quieter but significant dimension. Beijing's engagement can improve connectivity and offer capital for ports, rail links, and industrial zones. At the same time, it can shift standards, increase debt or dependency risks, and reshape bargaining power among regional states. Turkey adds a more overt strategic layer: as a Black Sea littoral power and NATO member, Ankara combines a hard-security presence with growing leverage over economic cooperation (trade and FDI), regional connectivity and energy routes. Its deep partnership with Azerbaijan and pragmatic, transactional ties with Russia give Turkey a pivotal role in shaping outcomes—often independently from the preferences of other players. For the EU, this means cooperation with Turkey is necessary for stability. However, the country cannot be assumed to align automatically with European goals.

Iran introduces a different set of constraints, anchored in geography and threat perceptions. Tehran views the South Caucasus—especially Armenia's Syunik corridor—as vital to preventing strategic encirclement and preserving access routes linking Iran to Russia. Any corridor arrangement that weakens Armenia's effective control or expands Turkish-Azerbaijani influence is therefore likely to trigger Iranian pushback, complicating regional deals and increasing the risk of escalation.

Georgia: from "model partner" to strategic decoupling

For many years, Georgia was widely described as one of the most promising partners of the EU and NATO in the Eastern neighbourhood. Yet domestic political polarisation and a supersonic authoritarian slide have spilled over into foreign policy. In recent years, Georgia has experienced a dramatic rise in pressures on political pluralism, the politicisation of state institutions, and the decisive narrowing of the operating space for watchdog organisations, civil society, and independent media. Today, Georgia's domestic trajectory is marked by "foreign agent" and grant-related legislation and protest-related restrictions. At the strategic level, Tbilisi's decision

¹³ HI Sutton, *Uncrewed Platforms Have Been Critical to Ukraine's Success in the Black Sea*, RUSI Commentary, Royal United Services Institute, 20.08.2024. <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uncrewed-platforms-have-been-critical-ukraines-success-black-sea>

to pause the EU accession track until 2028 has pushed the EU–Georgia relationship into a de facto freeze, even as pro-European public sentiment remains visible in recurring mobilisations.¹⁴

For the EU, the key issues are not only normative (democratic standards) but also strategic and geopolitical. If a partner, due to its de-democratisation, becomes less predictable in its commitments, the EU's leverage weakens, and long-term projects—particularly those tied to connectivity and resilience—become harder to anchor. For the EU, Georgia matters as a potential hub: a route linking the Black Sea with the South Caucasus and onward connectivity options. If trust erodes, space opens for alternative patrons and for a gradual reconfiguration of Georgia's strategic posture.

This does not mean Georgia is “lost forever” or is destined to go in only one direction (no alternative to Russia). It does mean that the EU's toolbox must be calibrated to a more complex reality: a partner society that may remain pro-European in sentiment, alongside political dynamics that create an undemocratic environment at the ruling elite level.¹⁵ In practical terms, this calls for a dual-track approach: sustained engagement with society and NGOs while applying credible conditionality to the political leadership in areas tied to the rule of law, media freedoms, and institutional checks.

Armenia and Azerbaijan: security dilemmas, corridors, and the limits of alliances

Armenia's post-2020 debate illustrates how security arrangements can lose credibility when they fail the stress test of a crisis. After the second Nagorno-Karabakh war, Armenian political discourse increasingly questioned the real value of long-standing reliance on Russia and Russia-led security formats, including the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The core grievance has not been “lack of help”, but a perceived gap between formal commitments and practical outcomes during periods of escalation.

In response, Armenia has explored diversifying its foreign relations, including deeper engagement with the EU and closer political ties with Western partners. This shift is gradual and constrained: Armenia remains exposed to regional pressure (security and corridor-related coercion by Azerbaijan and Turkey), has limited resources, and faces the risk of Russia's retaliation—political, economic, or security-related—if it moves too sharply away from its traditional security patron. Therefore, Armenia's strategic reorientation is best understood not as a clean “pivot”, but as a cautious attempt to broaden options under adverse conditions. For Armenia, there is an additional concern of being bypassed by routes that favor Georgia–Azerbaijan corridors.¹⁶

A key flashpoint is the proposed “Zangezur corridor”, which is meant to link Azerbaijan with Nakhchivan through Armenia's Syunik province. Azerbaijan's victory over Armenia has significantly strengthened Baku's bargaining power and widened its room to press for corridor arrangements on terms favorable to itself. Baku frames the project as a logistics initiative, while Armenian critics fear that special

14 Franziska Smolnik and Giorgi Tadumadze, *Georgia at a Crossroads: Democratic Backsliding and Turning Away from Pro-Western Course*, SWP Comment no. 27, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 06.2025. https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/comments/2025C27_Georgia_Crossroads.pdf

15 *Georgia: Parliamentary Elections, 26 October 2024. ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report*, OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, 20.12.2024. https://www.osce.org/sites/default/files/f/documents/1/6/584029_0.pdf

16 *Armenia and Azerbaijan: The Hard Road to a Lasting Peace*, Europe Briefing No. 98., International Crisis Group, 05.09.2025. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/brf/europe-central-asia/caucasus/armenian-azerbaijani-conflict/98-armenia-and-azerbaijan-hard-road-lasting-peace>

status or security arrangements could dilute Armenian control and risk sovereignty. Iran, which views southern Armenia as vital to its access routes and north-south connectivity, opposes any deal that weakens Yerevan's authority in Syunik, making the corridor a multi-actor geopolitical dispute.

The EU in the Black Sea: ambition, instruments, and the credibility gap

For years, EU policy documents have acknowledged the Black Sea and the South Caucasus as strategically relevant regions. In practice, EU engagement has often been fragmented across frameworks (Neighbourhood Policy, Eastern Partnership, sectoral initiatives, and project-based funding), which can dilute political impact even when financial inputs are substantial.¹⁷ The EU tends to be strongest in regulatory approximation, institution-building, and targeted economic support. At the same time, it is much weaker in shaping security outcomes in environments where coercion and military power are central.

After 2022, the EU's emphasis shifted more clearly toward resilience and connectivity: protecting critical infrastructure, strengthening energy security, reducing exposure to disinformation, and improving transport links that connect the EU to partners and alternative markets. A more integrated approach—linking Black Sea littoral member states (Romania and Bulgaria) with associated and candidate partners (including Ukraine and Moldova, and in different formats Georgia, Armenia, and Turkey)—has become more visible in EU messaging and programming.

However, a persistent challenge remains: the EU's influence ultimately depends on its credibility. If local elites do not believe the EU can sustain engagement through crises, conditionality loses power, and external competitors gain room. Therefore, the policy problem is not simply “more initiatives”, but a better linkage between EU goals and EU instruments: clearer political priorities, fewer parallel programs competing for attention, and stronger coordination with NATO when security externalities are unavoidable.

Poland's engagement: strong assets, underused regional focus

Although Poland is not a Black Sea state, its strategic interests are closely linked to the region's stability because the Black Sea strongly influences the security of NATO's eastern flank, shapes the sustainability of Ukraine's economic lifelines, and affects broader connectivity plans in Central and Eastern Europe. Poland also has a strong record of supporting political transformation and integration processes in the Eastern neighbourhood. This experience can be relevant for partners in the South Caucasus struggling with governance reforms and institutional resilience.

There have been past initiatives that illustrate both Poland's interest and the region's missed opportunities. One example discussed in earlier policy debates was the possibility of connecting Caspian energy routes (associated with the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan system) with Central European infrastructure through concepts linked to the Brody-Płock-Gdańsk corridor. Such projects promised diversification benefits but faced challenges with political coordination, financing constraints, and

¹⁷ *EU and Azerbaijan Enhance Bilateral Relations, Including Energy Cooperation*, European Commission, 18.07.2022. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/eu-and-azerbaijan-enhance-bilateral-relations-including-energy-cooperation-2022-07-18_en

security risks. The broader lesson is that infrastructure ambition requires sustained political leadership and credible risk management—conditions that are rarely met through declarations alone.

Looking forward, Poland's added value is likely strongest in three areas: 1) Transformation know-how and institutional support: public administration training, local governance expertise, regulatory approximation guidance; 2) Soft power and societal resilience: scholarships, academic exchange, support for independent media, civil society capacity building, anti-disinformation cooperation; 3) Connectivity aligned with EU priorities: participating in and politically backing projects that link North–South infrastructure with Black Sea resilience goals where feasible through EU instruments and regional formats. Importantly, this does not mean Poland should attempt a unilateral “grand strategy” for the South Caucasus. Instead, Warsaw can increase its effectiveness by acting as a coalition builder within the EU: pushing for consistent conditionality, advocating for resilience-related funding, and ensuring that the South Caucasus is not treated as an afterthought in broader neighbourhood policy. In practice, however, Poland has few measurable, project-level successes in the South Caucasus: its engagement is strongest in bilateral, soft-power instruments (exchanges, grants, civil-society support), while it lacks a recognisable flagship initiative and a sustained financial-institutional footprint in major connectivity and resilience projects.

Prospects for the region and the role of the West

The Black Sea and the South Caucasus are at a turning point shaped by overlapping pressures: the war in Ukraine, unresolved regional conflicts, domestic political tensions, and external competition involving Russia, Turkey, Iran and China. Georgia's democratic backsliding challenges the normative dimension of cooperation with the EU, while its external trajectory has become decisively less predictable. At the same time, Armenia is cautiously diversifying its foreign relations but under severe constraints. Finally, Azerbaijan combines strategic energy relevance with fundamental political differences with the EU (autocracy vs. democracy) that make it much more challenging to develop a tangible partnership.

For the EU, the core challenge is to translate strategic language into credible action. A workable approach requires layering instruments: financial presence and rule-of-law conditionality; long-term connectivity and infrastructure planning; and resilience measures tied to security realities. Coordination with NATO is not optional—because instability in the Black Sea directly shapes threat perceptions, force posture, and escalation risks on NATO's eastern flank, thereby influencing Alliance cohesion and operational readiness.

For Poland, the implication is clear: if Warsaw wants a stable Eastern Neighbourhood, it cannot treat the South Caucasus as a marginal add-on as it sometimes does today. While Ukraine will remain the top priority for Warsaw, the Black Sea and South Caucasus deserve more systematic attention in Poland's bilateral and EU-level policy—particularly where Polish experience and EU instruments overlap. Absent such engagement, the region will continue to be shaped primarily by power competition, and the EU and NATO will remain in a reactive posture—responding to crises rather than shaping the conditions that prevent them.

Russia's expansion southward: The strategic importance of the Black Sea region¹⁸

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Dominance in the northwestern Black Sea region will not disappear from the focus of imperial Russian revisionism after the end of its war of aggression. If Crimea will remain under Russian control, a massive hybrid and military threat to stability in the region must be expected. Therefore, in addition to a strict policy of non-recognition based on international law with regard to Ukraine's occupied territories, Kyiv's supporters (the "coalition of the willing") must provide the attacked country with comprehensive and legally binding security guarantees.

When it comes to possible negotiations to end Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, it appears that the future of the Ukrainian peninsula of Crimea, which Russia annexed in 2014 in violation of international law, hardly plays a role, or that its continued presence controlled by Russia is already de facto accepted. The US president's "peace plan", announced at the end of April 2025, includes a proposal to recognise Russian control over Crimea. This continues a trend observed since 2014: the military-strategic importance of the peninsula, as well as the Black Sea dimension as a whole. Overall, a possible successful outcome for Ukraine remains massively underestimated, as are the dangers that a Russian-controlled Crimea poses to a sustainable and just peace in Europe.

The creation of a "Russian World"

Indeed, the Russian annexation of Crimea in the spring of 2014 was the key event in the Russian Federation's quest for dominance in the wider Black Sea region, which the Russian President Vladimir Putin had already been pushing forward throughout the 2000s. These efforts focus on Ukraine but they extend beyond it and are equally directed against the EU and NATO. The annexation of Crimea has permanently disrupted the balance of power in the Black Sea. Whoever controls Crimea, which juts out into the Black Sea, and militarises it—as Russia has done since 2014—can control sea routes, straits, the Sea of Azov, and maritime areas in the northwestern Black Sea. The Kremlin is thereby exerting power not only against Ukraine but also against NATO and EU neighbouring states such as Romania and Bulgaria. Moreover,

¹⁸ This is the English, updated and revised version of an essay published in fall 2025: Wilfried Jilge, *Russlands Ausgreifen nach Süden. Die strategische Bedeutung der Schwarzmeerregion*, [in:] *Geteilter Horizont. Die Zukunft der Ukraine*, Frankfurt 2025, pp. 259-270.

the Russian Black Sea Fleet and the Caspian Fleet have formed an important basis for Russian intervention in Syria and Libya, and thus for Russian claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa.

In his speech on March 18, 2014, Putin justified the annexation of Crimea with central elements of the geopolitical concept of the “Russian World”. Here, he spoke of the Russians as a “divided people” and emphasised the “aspiration of the Russian World, of historical Russia, to restore unity.”. He justified the military intervention in Crimea with Russia’s alleged responsibility as a protecting power for its “compatriots” on the peninsula. He thus continued the anti-Maidan propaganda with which Russia attempted to discredit the protests against then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich and his abandonment of the EU as nationalist, neo-Nazi, Russophobic, and anti-Semitic. He also conjured up a supposed danger to the Russian-speaking population of Ukraine. According to this propaganda narrative, the residents of Crimea were threatened with punitive actions and repression by the Ukrainian authorities, which is why they had turned to Russia for help. At the same time, Putin reassured the people of Ukraine by calling on them not to believe those “who want to scare you with Russia, who shout that after Crimea, other regions will follow”.¹⁹

RE-New Russia (Novorossiya)

Just a few weeks later, on April 17, 2014, immediately before the start of Russia’s military escalation in Donbas, Putin again made a fundamental statement on Ukraine, clearly presenting the geopolitical foundation of his aggressive policy toward his neighbouring country. He used the geopolitical concept of Novorossiya, amorphous in terms of territorial boundaries, to formulate his actual imperial claims from a historical, or rather, historical-political, perspective, without having to literally threaten their implementation. For the first time, the Russian president himself officially introduced the term “Novorossiya” into the Russian discourse, which was intended to underpin the Russian Federation’s political claim to the northern coast of the Black Sea and to justify the war instigated by the Kremlin in the Donbas. Putin said that it is crucial to ensure the legal rights and interests of Russian and Russian-speaking citizens of southeastern Ukraine: “I remind you, using terminology from tsarist times, that this is New Russia: Kharkov, Luhansk, Donetsk, Kherson, Nikolayev, and Odessa were not part of Ukraine in tsarist times, these are all territories that were transferred to Ukraine by the Soviet government in the 1920s. Why they [the Bolsheviks, V.J.] did this, God only knows. All this happened after the respective victories of Potemkin and Catherine II in the famous wars with the center in Novorossiysk. . Hence, New Russia [Novorossiya]. Then, for various reasons, these territories were lost, but the people remained.”²⁰

By referring back to Catherine II and Prince Grigory Potemkin, Putin’s real goal becomes clear: he wants to create a land corridor to Crimea and guarantee Russia unhindered access to the Black Sea coast. Ukraine would then be cut off from its vitally important ports through the occupation of all its southern oblasts with access to the Black Sea. Putin’s goal is the imperial strengthening of Russia and

19 *Обращение Президента Российской Федерации*, Президент России, 18.03.2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20603>

20 *Прямая линия с Владимиром Путиным*, Президента России, 17.04.2014, <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20796>

the degradation of Ukraine into an economically and politically unviable satellite state at Russia's mercy, or even its complete subjugation.

Crimea as an object of dispute

Since Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Russia has repeatedly attempted to strengthen its influence in Crimea and question the peninsula's affiliation with Ukraine. Relatively soon after Vladimir Putin took office, Russia provoked a crisis over the Ukrainian-owned island of Tuzla, located in the Kerch Strait, which nearly led to a military confrontation between Russia and Ukraine. In the summer of 2003, Russia, without warning, began building a dam that would connect the Russian-owned Taman Peninsula with Tuzla Island. Ukraine saw, with good reason, this fait accompli as an attempt by the Kremlin to "shift the course of the maritime border in its own favour and force Ukraine to control the Kerch Strait jointly with Russia". This would be done by establishing a connection between the Russian mainland and the island of Tuzla, since the "only shipping channel [...] west of the island of Tuzla runs in a north-south direction in Ukrainian territorial waters".²¹

The looming confrontation was averted through negotiations between presidents Leonid Kuchma and Putin, and the dam construction was halted. The result was a cooperation agreement declaring the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait to be historically internal waters of both states. Russia thus ensured that international maritime law does not apply in the Sea of Azov, and Ukraine is therefore not authorised to invite warships of friendly states (such as NATO) into its Azov ports without Moscow's consent. This enabled Russia to expand its military superiority in the region and, on this basis, gradually take sole control of the Sea of Azov after 2014.

Russia's hybrid war

Following the illegal annexation and military occupation of Crimea in 2014, Russia launched a comprehensive hybrid war against Ukraine at sea. With a systematic policy of fait accompli, Moscow has further undermined international law and expanded its dominance in the Black Sea. In the spring of 2014, for example, it occupied and militarised the Ukrainian gas platforms between the coast of Crimea and the coast off Odessa – with little international attention – thereby severely restricting the sea routes available to Ukraine. This includes especially the economically important sea route from the greater Odesa region to the Bosphorus.²²

With the completion of the illegal construction of the Crimean Bridge from the Russian Taman Peninsula to Kerch in 2018, the Kremlin created the conditions for a partial blockade of Ukrainian ships in the Kerch Strait, which negatively impacted the Ukrainian ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol and led to financial losses for Ukraine. In 2018, a Russian-initiated military confrontation broke out between the Russian Coast Guard and the Ukrainian Navy, in which Ukrainian naval vessels were boarded

21 Ralf Wachsmuth and Juri Silvestrov, *Der Damm des Anstoßes: Der Konflikt um die Insel Tuzla: Nur ein Sturm im Wasserglas oder eine ernste Krise in den ukrainisch-russischen Beziehungen?*, Länderberichte der Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 06.11.2003, [https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/der-damm-des-anstosses-der-konflikt-um-die-insel-tuzla-](https://www.kas.de/de/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/der-damm-des-anstosses-der-konflikt-um-die-insel-tuzla)

22 Wilfried Jilge, *Russlands Einfluss in der Großregion von Schwarzem und Kaspischen Meer*. [in:] *Antagonismen in der Nachbarschaft der Europäischen Union. Geopolitische Ambitionen in der Schwarzmeer-/Kaspischen Region*, eds. Bernhard Bartsch, Christian Hanelt, Wilfried Jilge, Christian Koch, Miriam Kosmehl, Adnan Tabatabai, Kadri Tastan, Birgit Wetzels, Erdal Yalcin, Berlin 2020, pp. 11-27.

using Russian fighter jets and helicopters. In the spring of 2021, Russia amassed troops on Ukraine's eastern border and in the Black Sea region under the pretext of a major military exercise and practised a potential attack—including landing operations on Odesa. From April to October 2021, Russia announced an unprecedented closure of maritime areas in the Kerch Strait and around the entire Crimean peninsula, which, together with further military threats as part of the troop build-up by December 2021, led to de facto Russian control of the Sea of Azov already before the full-scale invasion in February 2022. Thus, using instruments of hybrid warfare that had already crossed the line into the military sphere, Russia pursued a creeping de facto annexation of strategically important maritime areas.

Thus, one year before the major attack on all of Ukraine, Russia had already undermined international maritime law in the Sea of Azov and the Black Sea and massively restricted the free navigation of Ukrainian ships. In doing so, it inflicted significant economic damage on Ukraine and, from a military-strategic perspective, created the conditions for an invasion of southern Ukraine. Even with the start of the full-scale invasion in February 2022, a strong focus remained on operations in and around the Black Sea. The goal stated by the Kremlin was to occupy the entire Black Sea coast of Ukraine and create a direct land connection between the southern Russian territories and Transnistria, which had seceded from the Republic of Moldova.

Not invincible: Russia's failure in the Black Sea

At the beginning of the full-scale aggression, Russian troops advanced from Crimea toward Kherson and relatively quickly occupied parts of the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia oblasts, thus blocking Ukraine's access to the Sea of Azov coast and its ports. In the course of this occupation the Battle of Mariupol took place between March and early May 2022. Even though the Ukrainian defenders had to surrender after heavy fighting, weeks of resistance gave Kyiv time to prevent Russia's intended encirclement of troops concentrated in the Donbas from the north and south; to tie down Russian units intended for the advance toward Mykolaiv and Odesa; to strengthen the defences of the Black Sea coast further west (Mykolaiv, Odesa); and to halt the advance of the Russian troops. Ultimately, Ukraine even succeeded in liberating certain areas.

A crucial success of the Ukrainian defence was the thwarting of the Russian attempt to conduct a landing operation on the Black Sea coast near Odesa and – using its asymmetric warfare – the permanent expelling of the Russian Black Sea Fleet from the northwestern Black Sea. Thus, even after Moscow's withdrawal from the internationally brokered grain agreement in July 2023, it was able to maintain commercial shipping via the Black Sea route. This was particularly profitable due to low transport costs, as well as important exports via the Black Sea ports. These operations were expanded compared to 2023. In addition, Kyiv can now export not only agricultural products but also, for example, chemicals and ores.

It would be a mistake to assume that Russia has abandoned its goal of establishing military control over the entire northern Black Sea coast, including the strategically, economically, and ideologically important port city of Odesa. Putin and politicians and ideologists close to the Kremlin have repeatedly made clear that they consider Odesa a Russian city and the historical centre of Novorossiia, including Ukraine's oblasts of Zaporizhzhia, Kherson, Mykolayiv and Odesa.

Russia's war aims

Russia has been taking measures to improve its position for further advances in southern Ukraine since 2022. For example, it has been expanding the railway from Rostov along the Sea of Azov toward Crimea, which is crucial for military logistics. This has been done to create an alternative to the vulnerable Crimean Bridge and at the same time to enable the faster and more extensive deployment of troops and equipment. In addition, other railway tangents are planned as reserve lines. At the same time, economic integration and military cooperation between the southern Russian regions and the occupied Ukrainian territories in the southeast are being advanced. This includes the creation of an Azov Flotilla with modern ships capable of being equipped with medium-range missiles (range up to 2500 km). Additional military capabilities for a potential crossing of the Dnipro River (the "Dnipro River Flotilla") have also been created.

For the EU and NATO, it is essential to prevent Russia from resuming its hybrid war in the northwestern Black Sea, thereby threatening the Danube estuary. This area is vital for both sides and especially to the security and economic interests of the EU and NATO members Bulgaria and Romania – such as the development and exploitation of gas deposits in their exclusive economic zones (e.g. gas fields).

Those who now share responsibility for the path to a just and lasting peace must be aware of the importance of the Black Sea region. A threat to NATO exists not only in the north, for example in Narva, Estonia, but also in the Black Sea, where Crimea functions in Russia's military-strategic perspective as a heavily armed "Kalinigrad of the South". Anything that unnecessarily strengthens Russia's starting position in the Black Sea region and brings it closer to the future realisation of its strategic goals outlined above must be avoided at all costs. Therefore, all efforts by Ukraine to protect its maritime claims in the Sea of Azov under international law should also be supported by the EU and NATO. The declaration of the Sea of Azov as an internal body of water by the Kremlin means that its de facto annexation cannot be accepted under any circumstances.²³

Territorial concessions to Russia – including those concerning the Crimean peninsula – must not be made lightly and certainly should not acquire any legal force under international law if Ukraine were to initially accept the continued control occupation of the territories currently occupied by Russia. First, a war of aggression would be rewarded and the principle of the inviolability of borders would be heavily undermined – with potential consequences not only for Europe (Baltic States, Baltic Sea), but also for the world (South China Sea, Taiwan). Second, massive human rights violations (oppression, expulsion or deportations, demographic changes, cultural destruction) would be virtually legitimised, and the ability to combat and punish them would be severely limited. This principle, incidentally, already applies while Russia continues to maintain de facto control over Ukrainian territories. Third, Europe must be aware of the great strategic importance of Crimea and the southern Ukrainian territories for the future economic and military balance of power. If Crimea's affiliation with Russia were recognized under international law, the Kremlin

²³ *Russia wants to declare the Sea of Azov internal waters*, Ukrainian Shipping Magazine, 6.12.2023, <https://en.usm.media/russia-wants-to-declare-the-sea-of-azov-internal-waters/>

could attempt to redraw the maritime borders in the Black Sea, including the exclusive economic zones. Moscow could then use this to expand its hybrid or even military activities.

Preserving Ukraine's successes in the Black Sea: Expanded European support is needed

At the same time, European partners must further expand military support so that Ukraine can maintain its access to the Black Sea and improve its negotiating position. This includes, for example, the delivery of air defence systems and the support of Ukraine's current development of ballistic missiles, as well as precise long-range deep strike capabilities (including the German Taurus cruise missile) to combat important military bases and launch sites in the Russian hinterland and in Crimea. This would also help to further decimate the Russian warships, which have now been almost completely withdrawn from Crimea to Novorossiysk at the eastern Black Sea coast. Support for the development and upscaling of interceptor drones and associated detection systems to combat Russian sea and river drones would also be crucial. These drones are increasingly being used by Moscow to terrorise Ukrainian ports in the Danube Delta and the greater Odesa region, and also pose a threat to NATO neighbours Romania and Bulgaria.²⁴

Finally, for the period following the cessation of hostilities, Ukraine needs reliable, legally binding security guarantees with robust military components from its European partners. Regarding the Black Sea, a no-fly zone would be necessary to protect Ukrainian ports and freedom of navigation, which could be established using Romanian air bases. Furthermore, a permanent maritime presence organized by the coalition of the willing would be required to protect trade routes and critical underwater infrastructure in order to prevent Russia from resuming the massive hybrid war of 2014-2022 and thus from preparing for renewed aggression. All of this requires the EU and NATO to finally recognise that the Black Sea is at least as important for the coherence and defensibility of the eastern flank as, for example, the Baltic Sea region.

²⁴ George Scutaru, *The Russian Attack on the Danube with a Naval Drone. Implications for NATO and EU Security*, Brief Report, New Strategy Center, 02.09.2025, <https://newstrategycenter.ro/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/Brief-Report-Russian-Attack-on-the-Danube-with-a-naval-drone.pdf>

From Compassion to Conditionality: Mapping German Attitudes Toward Ukraine's EU Membership

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More than four years since Russia's full-scale invasion, Germany's support for Ukraine remains steady – but has never meant a blank check for EU accession. As corruption scandals shake Kyiv and war fatigue sets in across Europe, Berlin is sending a quiet but unmistakable message: the path to EU membership runs through one inescapable standard – the Fundamentals.

During a conference on Ukraine and the future of the European Union held in Berlin in late 2025 – shortly after major corruption scandals involving Ukraine's Energy Ministry had come to light – a representative from Germany's Federal Foreign Office emphasised something that has been fundamental to EU integration since its inception: „every accession debate begins and ends with the Fundamentals.“ The normative architecture she referred to encompassed the rule of law, judicial independence, democratic checks and balances, anti-corruption measures, human rights, minority protection, a functioning market economy, and the ability to adopt and implement the *acquis communautaire*.

Germany has long treated the Fundamentals as far more than procedural benchmarks. Regardless of the governing coalition, these principles are seen as the constitutional DNA of the Union – the safeguards preventing the erosion of European values (human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including rights of minorities). As Foreign Minister Johann Wadepful told the Bundestag in late January 2026, “there is a clear expectation that candidate countries, including Ukraine, must align with European values and norms.”²⁵

Indeed, for Germany – a state whose post-World War II identity is bound to *Rechtsstaatlichkeit* (the rule of law) and whose foreign policy is inseparable from European integration – the bar has always been high.

Yet, Germany's self-perception and reality haven't always aligned. On Russian gas, Germany ignored repeated warnings from Poland and the Baltic states, clinging for years to the concept of „Wandel durch Handel“(change through trade). These blind spots became painfully visible when Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

But precisely because German foreign policy has been framed as values-driven, Ukraine's EU path is perceived in Berlin as a multidimensional test of Kyiv's

²⁵ Wadepful: *Faire Chance der Ukraine für einen EU-Beitritt, Befragung der Bundesregierung*, Bundestag, 28. 01. 2026, <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2026/kw05-de-regierungsbefragung-1135998>

resilience, of Europe's geopolitical resolve, and of the EU's capacity to adapt to a new era of geopolitical confrontation. The road is bumpy – not because Ukraine lacks willingness, but because it is waging two existential battles at once for the survival of the state and the systemic reform of its institutions.

The „Four Ks” of German Perception

To grasp the perceptual shift in Germany in 2022, it's essential to understand how deeply entrenched earlier frames were. A 2018 study by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), "Die Ukraine in den Augen Deutschlands", identified four dominant associations shaping German views: „Krim, Krieg, Korruption, Krise" – Crimea, war, corruption, crisis.²⁶ These were no fringe clichés; they defined Germany's view of Ukraine. Overall, they weren't fringe clichés but core pillars of Germany's collective mental map which were very deeply rooted.

The Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014) only briefly disrupted this. German media covered the pro-EU protests intensely – Ukrainians being shot beneath EU flags, and most tragically the Heavenly Hundred, generated widespread sympathy within German society for Ukrainians. However, even as Ukraine undertook major reforms – decentralisation, transparent procurement, and the creation of anti-corruption institutions – the German public did not seriously envision Ukraine as a future EU member.

From 2014 until early 2022, Ukraine appeared in German public discourse mainly as a geopolitical buffer, a fragile democracy, or a humanitarian concern, a country engaged in a protracted conflict. Among political elites, Ukraine's strategic relevance slowly increased, but without broader recognition that the country's trajectory would become central to Europe's security. In wider society, Ukraine remained „Europe-adjacent", not „Europe-in-formation". As a result, EU candidate status seemed unimaginable.

Russia's full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, produced one of the most dramatic shifts in German foreign-policy consciousness since reunification. It triggered the so-called *Zeitenwende* – former Chancellor Scholz's term for a fundamental break with Germany's post-Cold War security assumptions – upending decades of engagement with Moscow, cheap Russian energy as an economic foundation, and a deeply ingrained aversion to military spending.

Early polling illustrated this seismic shift. ARD-Deutschlandtrend (March–June 2022) showed almost 90% of Germans worried about Ukrainians, with 66% supporting severe sanctions against Russia. Support for weapons deliveries rose from around 20% in January 2022 to over 60% in March – remarkable for a country with a notoriously difficult relationship with its Bundeswehr.²⁷ The special edition of Körber-Stiftung's Berlin Pulse in March 2022 found around 67% of Germans viewed the war as a watershed requiring sustained engagement in war and crisis environments.²⁸

This marked an unprecedented alignment of German society with a third country at war. Not even during the Balkan wars in the 1990s or the Syrian refugee crisis

26 *Die Ukraine in den Augen Deutschlands. Bilder und Wahrnehmungen eines Landes im Umbruch*, eds. Andreas von Schumann and Roman Ivanov, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), Kyiv 2022, <https://www.bureau-fz.eu/uploads/2022/12/Die-Ukraine-in-den-Augen-Deutschlands.pdf>

27 *ARD-Deutschland-TREND, März 2022*, infratest dimap, ARD-1, <https://www.tagesschau.de/dtrend-747.pdf>

28 *Körber-Stiftung – Berlin Pulse Spezial – März 2022*, Körber-Stiftung, 14.03.2022. https://koerber-stiftung.de/site/assets/files/21576/koerber-stiftung_berlin_pulse_kw2210_tabs.pdf

(2015–2016) had Germany experienced such convergence of compassion, fear, and strategic awareness. A key driver was visual immediacy. German audiences saw real-time coverage from Kyiv and other cities under attack. The de-occupation of Bucha and Irpin, and the revelation of Russian atrocities, intensified this effect. Historical consciousness amplified the impact. Politicians, media and, civil society invoked parallels to 1939–45, describing the invasion as the gravest threat to European security since the Second World War.

German society appeared to recognise this wasn't a regional conflict but a systemic assault on Europe's security architecture. Ukraine came to be seen as defending Europe's normative order – and Germany's historical commitment to European integration. Yet even then, attitudes toward Ukraine's EU enlargement remained more cautious, with about 60% supporting accession.²⁹ – This acted as a reminder that, for many Germans, supporting Ukraine in war and supporting its EU membership weren't automatically linked.

Stabilisation, Fatigue, and Economic Anxiety

This unequivocal pro-Ukrainian shift didn't remain stable. After initial emotional mobilisation, enthusiasm declined. By late 2022 and early 2023, inflation, recession fears, and energy shocks reshaped attitudes. The war essentially became a grim routine. As households faced rising costs and uncertainty, solidarity gave way to pragmatic caution.

As a result, by the turn of 2023 and 2024 support for Ukraine's long-term EU accession fell below 50% – the lowest among major EU states. EU-wide support hovered around 60%, placing Germany clearly at odds with the broader trend (Bertelsmann Stiftung eupinions). Many Germans were sceptical of Ukrainian EU membership, pointing to corruption risks, integration costs, and fears of long-term financial obligations. The Autumn 2025 Standard Eurobarometer showed little recovery, with German support for enlargement generally still hovering around 50%. This runs, against an EU-wide figure of 56%.³⁰

Multiple drivers contributed, with many unrelated to Ukraine itself. The Israel-Gaza war pushed Ukraine off German front pages, creating the psychological plateau typical of protracted conflicts: less coverage, less urgency, less engagement.

A structural factor deepened this: Germany is among the EU's most enlargement-sceptical states – regardless of which country is discussed. As Europe's largest economy and a major budget contributor, Germany has consistently focused on preserving the Union's institutional cohesion. Berlin's approach reflects a preference for strengthening existing structures over rapid expansion, with particular emphasis placed on candidates demonstrating fiscal responsibility and functioning

²⁹ *Mehrheit unterstützt Aufnahme der Ukraine in die EU*, ZDF, 17.06.2022 <https://presseportal.zdf.de/pressemitteilung/mehrheit-unterstuetzt-aufnahme-der-ukraine-in-die-eu>

³⁰ Isabell Hoffmann and Daniela Schmidt, *Ukraine Trends December 2023*, eupinions, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 04.03.2024, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/EZ_eupinions_Ukraine_Trends_12_2023.pdf

Isabell Hoffmann and Catherine E. de Vries, *Germany, the War and the Vote*, 14.02.2024, https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/fileadmin/files/BSt/Publikationen/GrauePublikationen/EZ_eupinions_Germany_the_War_and_the_Vote_02.2024.pdf;

Standard Eurobarometer 104- Autumn 2025, European Commission, December 2025, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3378>

rule of law institutions.³¹ While Ukraine's membership could strengthen European security, many Germans are uneasy about admitting a country still fighting a war – not least because the EU's mutual defence provisions might obligate member states to join Ukraine's defence.

When it comes to Ukraine's EU accession specifically, conditionality dominates the German debate. Whereas in many EU states sympathy for Ukraine's wartime suffering outweighs concerns about other topics, Germans tend to hesitate. Concerns about the financial implications of Ukraine's EU accession have become intertwined with Germany's prolonged economic downturn since 2022 – characterised by energy crises, high inflation and industrial struggles. This feeds anxieties about economic security and Ukrainian accession as a potential financial burden.³² These concerns have fuelled domestic political polarisation, with the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), and the conservative national left Bündnis Sahra Wagenknecht (BSW), – weaponizing war-related anxieties.

While the AfD, BSW, and parts of the far left have consistently opposed arms deliveries, sanctions, and EU membership, the Greens have emerged as Ukraine's strongest political supporters, driven by human rights commitments and geopolitical responsibility. The centre-right Christian Democratic Union (CDU) is vocally supportive of Ukraine but cautious. Chancellor Friedrich Merz has indicated that EU accession cannot realistically happen while Ukraine is at war. The centre-left Social Democratic Party (SPD) and liberals remain internally divided between pro-European enlargement advocates and more fiscally cautious realists. Across the political spectrum, parties closely monitor public polls and attempt to shape them. This is – particularly important given the AfD's strong polling (around 25%) ahead of federal and state elections.

Corruption, Conditionality and Cost Sensitivity since 2024

By 2024, public opinion had settled into a more stable equilibrium: broadly supportive of Ukraine – but only under strict conditions. Many Germans feel their earlier caution has been validated since July 2025. For Ukraine, the risk is a return to the pre-invasion narrative that shaped German debates for years: war, crisis and, corruption.

In July 2025, Ukraine's Rada passed Bill No. 12414, curbing the independence of anti-corruption institutions. The move triggered the largest protests in Ukraine since the full-scale invasion and forced a repeal of the law. But the reputational impact remained. German media reacted sharply to these events.

The November 2025 corruption scandal produced an even sharper reaction. Investigations targeted senior officials in the Justice Ministry and Energoatom. Some Ukraine supporters at Berlin conferences were shocked, though prominent think tanks had long framed such investigations as proof of Ukraine's civil society holding power accountable in line with European values.

German media framed the Energy Ministry scandal as the largest since the start of the full-scale war, warning it risked damaging Ukraine's EU accession prospects

31 Bojan Zorić, *EU enlargement and integration: Voices of support and scepticism*, Briefs, European Union Institute for Security Studies, 19.06.2025, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/briefs/eu-enlargement-and-integration-voices-support-and-scepticism>

32 Isabell Hoffmann and Catherine E. de Vries, *A Burden or a Bond? Support for Ukraine aid is high, except when it comes to economic issues*, eupinions, Bertelsmann Stiftung, 11.12.2023, <https://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/de/publikationen/publikation/did/a-burden-or-a-bond>

and strengthening sceptics across Europe. German officials quickly emphasised that no German funds or companies were directly affected. Several commentators called for tighter EU-level anti-corruption safeguards and stricter anti-corruption benchmarks for Kyiv.³³

German political actors – including Bundestag EU Committee members – have repeatedly stressed that Ukraine’s sovereignty and the independence of its anti-corruption institutions are non-negotiable prerequisites for EU accession.

These statements only reconfirmed that from Berlin’s vantage point, the accession journey is framed by one overarching principle: reform credibility is the determining factor – not sympathy, not geopolitics alone, and not speed. A lasting peace architecture for Europe, Wadehul argued, presupposes that Ukraine has a „fair chance” at EU membership – but that chance must be earned.

At the end of the day, because everything starts and ends with the Fundamentals.

³³ Florian Hassel, *Will die EU der Ukraine helfen, muss sie aufhören, so nachsichtig zu sein*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 16.11.2025, <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/meinung/ukraine-korruption-selenkij-kommentar-li.3338145?reduced=true>

Between the market and the community: Ukraine's integration and the future of European agriculture

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Ukraine's integration with the European Union – and its agricultural policy in particular – is more than an accession process: it is a test of whether Europe can act strategically in a world that no longer rewards hesitation. The outcome will depend not only on Ukraine's capacity to reform, but on the willingness of the EU and its Member States, and Poland above all, to treat enlargement as an investment in their own future rather than a threat to their present.

Ukraine's integration with the European Union – particularly in the field of agriculture and rural development – cannot be understood solely through the prism of trade liberalisation or market access, but also as a continuation of the foundational logic upon which European integration was built: the conviction that agriculture serves not merely as a productive sector but as a pillar of social stability, territorial cohesion and political community. From the Treaty of Rome onwards, the CAP has been designed to bridge market and society, and it is within this broader tradition – as much as within any technical accession framework – that Ukraine's agricultural integration must be situated and assessed.³⁴

The scale of Ukrainian agriculture, its specific structural features and the profound consequences of war mean that this process represents a critical test of the Union's capacity to uphold the original balance between economic integration and social cohesion. At the same time, it exposes growing internal tensions within the EU, where agriculture and rural areas have increasingly become focal points of social contestation related to economic change, geopolitical uncertainty, and the future direction of European policies.

Scale and significance of agriculture: structural constraints and systemic risks

The significance of Ukrainian agriculture within the context of European integration is derived from its scale. Ukraine's utilised agricultural area amounts to approximately 41.5 million hectares, representing nearly 70% of the country's territory and close to one quarter of the total agricultural land in the European Union. By comparison, the EU as a whole accounts for around 157 million hectares, while Poland's utilised agricultural area stands at approximately 14.6 million hectares.

³⁴ Katarzyna Zawalińska, *Wspólna Polityka Rolna: dylematy i kontrowersje. W poszukiwaniu naukowych podstaw jej zrozumienia*, [in:] *Polska wieś i polskie rolnictwo. 20 lat w Unii Europejskiej*, eds. Paweł Chmieliński, Grzegorz Gorzelak, Warszawa 2024, p. 287.

This asymmetry places Ukraine in a structurally distinct position: as a single country, it controls an agricultural resource base comparable to that of several large Member States combined.

The economic weight of agriculture further underscores this distinction. Prior to the Russian full-scale invasion of 2022, agriculture contributed around 10–11% of Ukraine's GDP. This is compared with 2–3% in Poland and less than 2% on average in the EU. The contrast is even more pronounced when measured by employment: agriculture accounted for approximately 14% of Ukraine's labour force, against around 9% in Poland and just 4.2% across the EU as a whole. This gap between agricultural GDP share and employment share is not incidental – it reflects structurally low labour productivity in the sector, a pattern characteristic of economies where agriculture absorbs a disproportionate share of workers relative to the value it generates. For Ukraine, this represents not merely a statistical asymmetry but a fundamental structural challenge: successful integration will require not only regulatory alignment, but a deep transformation of how labour, land and capital are allocated across the rural economy.

These figures reflect the role of agriculture in Ukraine as something far greater than a productive sector: it is a cornerstone of macroeconomic stability, a primary driver of export earnings and, in the context of the war, one of the few remaining anchors of economic continuity. The full-scale invasion has not diminished this role – if anything, it has intensified it. As broad swathes of the economy have been disrupted or destroyed, agricultural exports have emerged as one of Ukraine's most resilient sources of foreign currency, sustaining the country's external financial position under conditions that would have overwhelmed most other sectors.

Ukraine is among the world's leading producers and exporters of cereals and oilseeds, particularly wheat, maize and sunflower products. In these sectors, production volumes place Ukraine among the largest suppliers globally, including the European market. Poland and most EU Member States, by contrast, derive a larger share of value from processed agri-food products, including meat, dairy and food preparations. Regulatory standards, capital intensity, and integration into internal supply chains play a decisive role regarding these products. This divergence in production profiles highlights both areas of potential competition and opportunities for complementarity along agri-food value chains.

Ukrainian agriculture, however, is characterised by a pronounced and persistent structural dualism, which constitutes one of its most fundamental challenges. On the one hand, the sector includes a very large number of small household and subsistence-oriented farms, which play a crucial social role in sustaining rural livelihoods. However, these businesses operate with limited access to capital, technology and markets. On the other hand, production is increasingly dominated by large-scale, vertically integrated 'agroholdings', often controlling hundreds of thousands of hectares and specialising in the export of raw commodities.

This dual structure generates significant economic and social asymmetries. Agroholdings benefit from economies of scale, preferential access to capital and logistics, and strong positions in global commodity markets, while small and medium-sized farms remain weakly integrated into local value chains.³⁵ From the perspective

³⁵ This structural divide has direct implications for food security: while agroholdings drive export performance, smaller farms remain the primary suppliers of domestically consumed staples. This makes their viability a matter of public interest beyond the agricultural sector alone.

of European integration, this model sits uneasily with the EU's agricultural paradigm, which is historically built around family farming, the multifunctionality of rural areas, and policy instruments designed to balance productivity with social cohesion. This structural divide has direct implications for food security: while agrohholdings drive export performance, smaller farms remain the primary suppliers of domestically consumed staples such as potatoes, vegetables and other perishables. This makes their viability a matter of public interest that extends well beyond the agricultural sector. Yet the governance challenges posed by this dualism are compounded by two further pressures that have reshaped the operating environment of Ukrainian agriculture entirely: the consequences of war, and a deepening demographic crisis in rural areas.

The first problem concerns the impact of the invasion on the operating environment of Ukrainian agriculture. War-related damage has severely affected transport networks, storage and processing facilities, as well as energy supply, leading to disrupted supply chains and higher production and transaction costs. At the same time, substantial areas of agricultural land, amounting to up to 30 per cent in some regions, have been rendered temporarily unusable due to contamination, landmines and physical degradation. This is particularly true in frontline areas and territories that were previously occupied.

Second, the structural weaknesses of Ukrainian agriculture are compounded by a profound demographic crisis in rural areas – one that predates the war but has been sharply intensified by it. Long-standing trends of depopulation, population ageing and outward migration have steadily eroded the human capital base of the countryside. The war has accelerated these dynamics through mobilisation, forced displacement and prolonged uncertainty, leading to acute labour shortages in agriculture. This is despite the continued prevalence of informal employment.³⁶

As a result, rural communities are increasingly sustained by older populations and by women, who have assumed a growing share of agricultural and social responsibilities in the absence of working-age men. At the same time, access to public services, education and vocational training in rural areas remains limited. These demographic pressures constrain not only agricultural productivity, but also the capacity of rural areas to absorb investment, implement reforms and participate effectively in integration processes.

Ukraine's accession path in agriculture

Ukraine's accession negotiations with the EU span 35 chapters grouped into six thematic clusters – a framework that maps the full breadth of regulatory alignment required for membership. By autumn 2025, Ukraine had completed the screening of all chapters, a process entailing detailed assessment of the compatibility of national legislation and administrative practice with the EU *acquis*. Although the formal opening of negotiations has been partially delayed by Hungary's objections, the European Commission confirmed the conclusion of the screening phase, clearing the way for substantive talks to begin.

For agriculture, the completion of screening for Chapter 11 (Agriculture and Rural Development) in September 2025 was of particular significance. The assessment

³⁶ Natalia Mamonova and Olena Borodina, *Food systems of internally displaced persons in Ukraine during Russia's full-scale war*, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, June 2025 53 (2), pp. 1-21.

encompassed a broad range of policy areas – state aid, market regulation, digitalisation and market supervision – and produced the first comprehensive picture of where alignment stands and, critically, where the steepest regulatory climb still lies ahead.

These negotiating advances are proceeding in parallel with a revision of the bilateral trade framework. A revised Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which entered into force on 28 October 2025, provides for gradual trade liberalisation while reinforcing safeguard clauses that permit temporary protective measures in the event of market disruption. Overall, this is an instrument of particular sensitivity in agriculture, where the stakes on both sides are high. Yet progress at the negotiating table should not obscure the scale of what lies ahead: agriculture remains among the most demanding chapters of the entire accession process, not because of its political complexity alone, but because of the depth of institutional transformation required to implement the Common Agricultural Policy and satisfy EU food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary standards. These are areas where Ukraine's regulatory and administrative capacity, though development, remains significantly constrained.

Lessons from Poland's EU Accession

The prospects for cooperation and modernisation in Ukrainian agriculture cannot be assessed in isolation from the experience of previous enlargement rounds, particularly that of Poland. Although the scale and structure of Ukrainian agriculture differ significantly from those of Poland at the time of accession, the Polish accession experience offers the most instructive reference point for understanding both the opportunities and the conditions under which agricultural integration can support long-term development rather than deepen existing asymmetries.

In Poland, agriculture was among the most politically sensitive sectors during the accession process. Prior to 2004, fears of market displacement, land acquisition by foreign entities, income instability, and the loss of national control over food production featured prominently in public debate. Of course, this was particularly true in rural areas. These concerns translated into weaker referendum support in predominantly agricultural regions. Accession negotiations in agriculture were therefore characterised by demands for transitional periods, differentiated implementation of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), and safeguards aimed at protecting farm incomes and land markets during the adjustment phase.

With hindsight, these concerns were not unfounded, but neither did they materialise in the catastrophic form often predicted. The decisive factor was not market opening alone, but the gradual construction of institutional capacity: accredited payment agencies, inspection and control systems, land registers, statistical infrastructure, advisory services and sectoral representation within EU policy-making structures. Crucially, this institutional build-up was accompanied by substantial financial transfers, a stable regulatory framework, and a clear strategic horizon associated with membership in a prosperous and politically coherent Union.³⁷ Over time, Polish agriculture modernised and integrated into European value chains. The sector

³⁷ Jerzy Plewa, *Polskie rolnictwo i gospodarka żywnościowa w ujęciu globalnym*, [in:] *Polska wieś i polskie rolnictwo: 20 lat w Unii Europejskiej*, eds. Paweł Chmieliński and Grzegorz Gorzelak, Warszawa 2024, p. 157.

became a net beneficiary of EU membership, while rural areas experienced a broader socio-economic transformation.

Ukraine enters the integration process under radically different conditions. The consequences of war, demographic decline and weaker administrative capacity significantly constrain its ability to independently replicate the Polish adjustment path. Unlike Poland, Ukraine lacks a dense network of specialised public agencies, experienced negotiators, and a mature research and statistical base capable of supporting evidence-based policy design in agriculture and rural development. Without sustained and targeted support from both EU institutions and Member States – particularly those with relatively recent accession experience like Poland – these gaps are unlikely to be closed in the medium term.

Yet this potential role for Poland is complicated by the domestic political context. In Polish public debate, Ukrainian agricultural accession is predominantly framed as a competitive threat rather than a strategic opportunity. This is a perception reinforced by the disruption caused by the influx of Ukrainian grain and agricultural products following the 2022 trade liberalisation measures. The issue has been actively politicised, cutting across party lines and mobilising rural constituencies that remain electorally significant. This dynamic risks constraining Poland's willingness to champion Ukrainian agricultural preparation within EU institutions, precisely at the moment when Polish expertise and political engagement would be most valuable.

A Union worth the risk: strategic choices for Europe and Ukraine

Ukraine's integration into the European Union is not merely an enlargement exercise – it is a stress test of the Union's capacity to reinvent itself in response to a fundamentally altered geopolitical, economic and social landscape. Meeting this challenge demands more than procedural accession management – it requires a deliberate and explicitly strategic reorientation of how Europe conceives of integration itself.

Poland's accession remains the single most illuminating precedent. Poland entered the Union propelled by deep domestic conviction – a society-wide belief in the prospect of joining a stable, prosperous and rule-bound political community. That conviction sustained difficult reforms, endured protracted negotiations and absorbed far-reaching institutional transformations, not least in agriculture and rural policy, where dedicated agencies, specialist expertise, reliable data infrastructure and a robust research base proved indispensable. Ukraine faces this process under incomparably harsher conditions: an active war, acute demographic pressure and an administrative capacity that remains severely stretched. Without sustained, targeted and politically committed support from Poland and EU institutions alike, these structural constraints will not be overcome by goodwill alone.

Yet external assistance, however generous, is not sufficient on its own. The Polish experience makes clear that deep integration ultimately rests on a credible internal incentive structure. For Ukraine, this means the EU must be perceived not as a distant regulatory authority imposing compliance burdens, but as a genuine framework for development, investment and social advancement. Sustaining the attractiveness and coherence of the European project is therefore not incidental to enlargement – it is a precondition for it, and a shared responsibility of the Union and every one of its Member States.

The geopolitical context makes this imperative urgent rather than aspirational. In a world defined by intensifying strategic competition, economic coercion and

eroding confidence in open markets, the EU can no longer afford a passive adaptation to external pressures. Ukraine's accession opens a rare opportunity to rethink integration from the ground up – to build a more flexible, differentiated model that accommodates sequenced participation, sector-specific transition periods, and robust safeguard mechanisms where the stakes are highest, including in agriculture.

That model must not stop at Ukraine's borders. Moldova, the Western Balkans and, in time, the South Caucasus all require credible European pathways. Where such pathways are absent or unconvincing, the vacuum will be filled – by Russia, China, Turkey or others – at direct cost to European values and long-term interests. Integration must therefore deliver not symbolic gestures but tangible economic returns: market enlargement, the deepening of value-chains, investment in processing capacity and, especially in agri-food systems, the kind of structural modernisation that generates durable prosperity. These economic commitments must be anchored in equally firm guarantees of democratic governance, institutional stability and social cohesion.

Green transformation should not be an afterthought in this agenda – it should underpin it. Agriculture, more than almost any other sector, demonstrates that environmental sustainability and economic viability are not opposites. Climate-resilient production, resource efficiency and healthier consumption patterns can and must reinforce one another. Understood in these terms, green policy is not a constraint on growth but an investment in long-term resilience – and a compelling argument for integration rather than a complication of it.

Ukraine's accession – and its relationship with the Common Agricultural Policy in particular – is therefore not simply an accession challenge. It is a defining moment for the European Union as a political project. The outcome will determine whether Europe can emerge as a more cohesive, resilient and strategically autonomous community: one capable of reconciling market integration with social stability, and economic ambition with environmental responsibility. It must also marry the legitimate interests of individual Member States with a reinvigorated sense of European purpose.

The question that remains is as simple as it is consequential: whether Poland and its EU partners are genuinely prepared to debate, initiate and support the reforms that this moment demands. Ukraine, in turn, must be ready to place long-term trust in the Union not as an external constraint, but as the most credible framework it has for its own development.