Download date: 14. Nov. 2026

Danish Institute for International Studies

Power moves east

Poland's rise as a strategic European player

Surwillo, Izabela; Slakaityte, Veronika

Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication

Citation for pulished version (APA):
Surwillo, I., & Slakaityte, V. (2024). *Power moves east: Poland's rise as a strategic European player* . Dansk Institut for Internationale Studier. DIIS Policy Brief

General rights
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal ?

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Power moves east

POLAND'S RISE AS A STRATEGIC EUROPEAN PLAYER

Since Russia's war in Ukraine, Europe's geopolitical centre has shifted eastward. Poland's economic growth, regional leadership and defence role have cemented its position as a major force in the continent's power structure.

As the fifth-largest EU Member State by population and one of the fastest-growing economies in Europe, Poland's political standing stems from its deepening integration into Western political and security frameworks. Whereas accession to NATO in 1999 solidified its defence guarantees and aligned it with the Western security structures, joining the EU in 2004 accelerated Poland's economic integration into the European Single Market. These milestones laid the

RECOMMENDATIONS

- In the changed geopolitical context, NATO's eastern defences should be strengthened through enhanced regional collaboration, infrastructure development and intelligence sharing – ensuring readiness along critical frontlines.
- EU military procurement collaboration should be fostered to reinforce interoperability and mitigate reliance on external suppliers.
- Poland's strategic position within NATO's and EU's support operations should be optimised through logistical frameworks to ensure uninterrupted support for Ukraine.

foundation for Poland to play a key role in regional initiatives such as the Weimar Triangle with France and Germany and the Visegrad Group together with Czechia, Slovakia and Hungary. Since 2016, Poland has also played an instrumental role in the Three Seas Initiative – a strategic framework enhancing regional cooperation and economic growth across twelve CEE nations.

Recognising signs of Russia's expansionist agenda early, Warsaw moved swiftly to reduce dependence on Russian energy and fortify its defences. Consequently, when much of Europe was caught off-guard by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Poland – alongside other CEE neighbours – was better positioned to navigate the shifting geopolitical landscape. This foresight has solidified Poland's role in shaping regional security dynamics.

This policy brief examines Poland's emergence as a strategic actor in European and transatlantic security and the far-reaching implications for Western countries like Denmark.

Remarkable economic growth

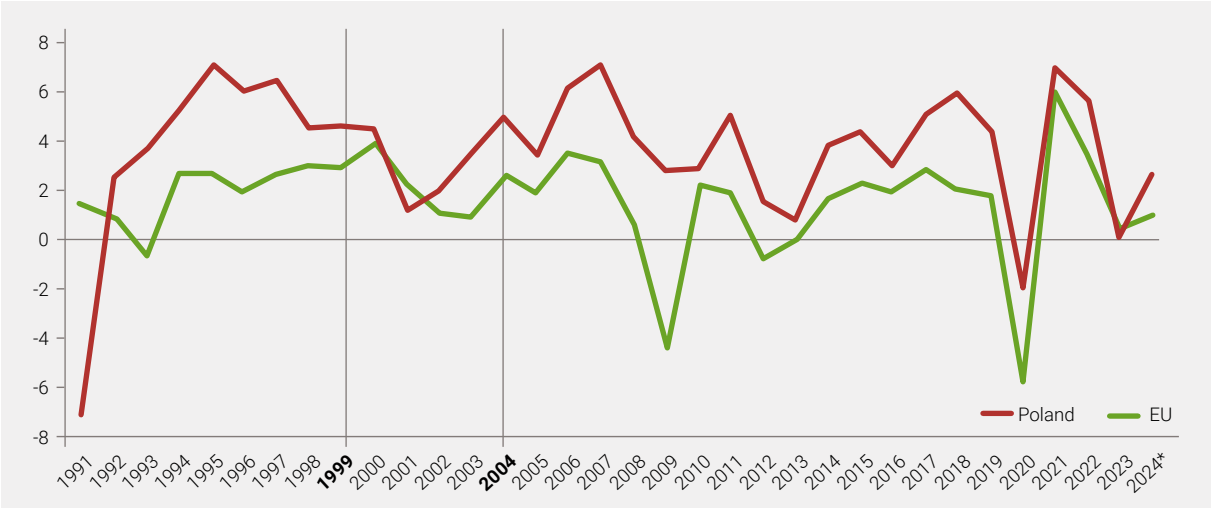
Since the fall of communism in 1989, Poland has undergone a remarkable shift from a centrally planned system to a market-based economy, emerging as one of Europe's powerhouses. This economic success has strengthened Poland's regional leadership in European and transatlantic security. Between joining the European Union in 2004 and COVID-ridden 2020, Poland's gross domestic product (GDP) nearly tripled. Even during the financial crisis of 2008, the country managed to avoid recession thanks to a mix of conservative fiscal policies, a diversified industrial base and cautious banking practices. Now the sixth-largest contributor to the EU economy, Poland represents 4.31 percent of the bloc's total GDP.

This growth has been driven by liberal market reforms and EU integration combined with internal factors such as a highly skilled workforce, robust domestic consumption and an expanding industrial base. A major external catalyst for this transformation has been the substantial inflow of EU structural funds, which played a decisive role in modernising infrastructure and supporting economic development. By 2023, Poland had received over €250 billion, with access to an additional €137 billion as of 2024, making it the largest recipient of EU funds. According to the Polish Economic Institute, had Poland not joined the EU, its GDP per capita would be 31 percent lower, stagnating at its 2014 level and reaching only 60% of the EU average.

Military spending surge

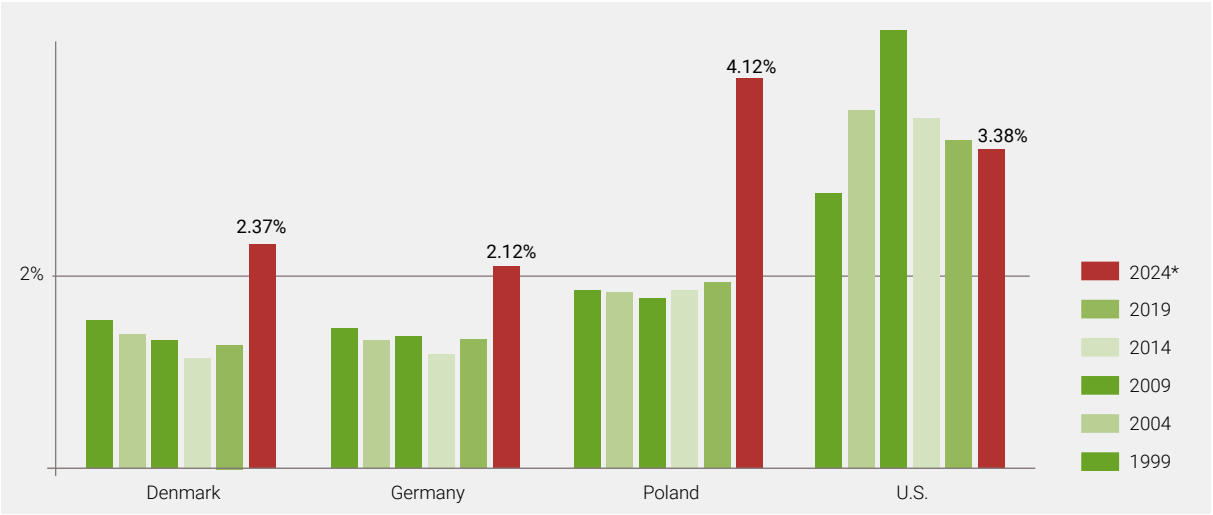
While the security situation in the EU's eastern neighbourhood has deteriorated over the past decade, Poland's economic success has enabled a significant increase in defence spending. Poland has consistently approached NATO's 2 percent GDP defence benchmarks, surpassing the target in 2015. Over the past decade, Poland's defence budget has tripled,

Table 1. Comparison of GDP growth: Poland and the EU (1991-2024, with 2024 estimates)



Data compiled from the World Bank, European Commission and Polish Economic Institute

Table 2. Defence expenditure as a percentage of GDP (1999-2024, with estimates for 2024)



Data compiled from the NATO archives

rising from €7.7 billion to €23.4 billion. In 2024, Poland's defence spending reached 4.12 percent, making it the heaviest spender on defence in NATO as a proportion of GDP.

At the core of Poland's defence strategy is an ambitious military modernisation programme. Since 2014, Poland has more than doubled its armed forces from 99,000 to 216,000 in 2024, surpassing even Germany's projected military size (185,600 in 2024). This expansion includes the establishment of the Territorial Defence Forces – a reserve force designed to bolster homeland defence. The 2022 Homeland Defence Act aims to further expand Poland's military to 300,000 personnel by 2035, making it the EU's largest land force.

Poland has also made substantial investments in military hardware. This effort includes acquiring Leopard 2 tanks, F-16 jets and the Patriot missile systems, with plans to add Abrams main battle tanks from the U.S., as well as K2 tanks and FA-50 fighter jets from South Korea. Significantly, Poland is the second country in the world, after the U.S., to acquire the Patriot Advanced Capability-3 (PAC-3) missile defence system. This system marks a major upgrade from earlier Patriot versions, with improved range and precision, as well as the ability to intercept ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and aircraft with hit-to-kill technology. The PAC-3's advanced radar and tracking capabilities also allow it to engage multiple targets simultaneously, providing Poland with state-of-the-art air defence.

These purchases complement Poland's domestic production of armoured personnel carriers and artillery, including the versatile Rosomak, KRAB self-propelled howitzers and the new BORSUK Infantry Fighting Vehicle, designed to replace Soviet-era BMPs.

The strategic eastern frontline

Poland's strategic location at the crossroads of Western and Eastern Europe has solidified its role as NATO's key eastern frontline state. As a vocal critic of Russian expansionism since the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Poland responded swiftly to the 2022 invasion, advocating for tougher sanctions and military support for Ukraine. It quickly became one of the top military aid suppliers, providing tanks, artillery and other equipment. Between January 2022 and April 2024, Poland allocated €4.33 billion in bilateral aid to Ukraine. This commitment coincided with Poland's pivotal role in managing the humanitarian crisis: by September 2024, the number of border crossings from Ukraine into Poland had surpassed 24.7 million, with approximately 1.8 million Ukrainians seeking asylum or protection in Poland. Due to its proximity to Ukraine, Poland also serves as the EU's and NATO's primary logistical hub for distributing military and humanitarian aid, alongside smaller centres in Romania and Slovakia. To date, over 150,000 tonnes of aid have been delivered, with over 90% of military supplies destined for Ukraine passing through Poland.

As the threats from Russia have escalated, Poland has been at the forefront of advocating for a robust NATO defence posture in the region. In response, NATO

established its Enhanced Forward Presence Battle Group in Poland, led by the U.S., in 2017 – reinforcing the Alliance's commitment to deterrence and collective defence. This presence, complemented by the deployment of U.S. and allied NATO forces, has been pivotal in strengthening NATO's eastern flank and bolstering regional security. Poland's geopolitical role is further enhanced by its close military ties with the United States. The Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), signed in 2020, formalised a permanent U.S. military presence in Poland, with approximately 10,000 U.S. troops stationed across the country. Coupled with construction of military infrastructure, this has established Poland's role as a central hub for NATO's defence strategy in the region. A key example is the Aegis Ashore missile defence system, which has operated in Redzikowo since 2023. As one of two land-based Aegis Ashore sites in Europe (the other is in Romania), Redzikowo is key to NATO's collective defence against short- and intermediate-range ballistic missiles. Moreover, in April 2024, in response to the militarisation of Kaliningrad and Russia's deployment of tactical nuclear weapons to Belarus, Polish President Andrzej Duda expressed Poland's readiness to host nuclear weapons under NATO's nuclear sharing policy. This move solidifies Poland's role in NATO's regional security and reaffirms its status in the Alliance's eastern deterrence strategy.

However, Poland's reliance on U.S. and South Korean defence systems raises concerns about the long-term sustainability of its defence industry, as offset investment and technology transfers might be insufficient. Additionally, limited European procurement (e.g., Leopard 2 tanks from Germany) could hinder Poland's deeper integration into the European defence sector. Poland's assertive stance on Russia also heightens its exposure to hybrid threats, which will require the development of advanced counter measures. Poland's military modernisation and aid to Ukraine have also placed pressure on its national budget. Balancing these commitments with domestic needs, such as healthcare and public services, which are additionally under strain from Ukrainian refugees, remains a challenge to Warsaw.

Implications for European security

In recent years, Poland has transitioned from a peripheral player to a central force in European security, actively co-shaping the continent's defence position. Importantly, the domestic political shift in 2023, with a more pro-EU government, has eased tensions with Brussels, marking a clear departure from the confrontational stance of the former government. Poland's increased defence spending and military modernisation reflect its commitment to addressing regional security challenges and strengthening NATO's collective security.

As Poland's influence grows, it may shift the balance in the EU's decision-making, potentially creating tension with NATO and EU countries that favour a more diplomatic approach to security challenges. For instance, Poland's Weimar Triangle partners have historically prioritised diplomatic dialogue, arms control and economic measures as primary tools for addressing security issues while avoiding the vigorous defence spending that characterises Poland's current approach.

As a key NATO member, Denmark stands to benefit from Poland's strengthened role in defending NATO's eastern flank and enhancing security in the Baltic Sea region. Closer ties with Warsaw on defence cooperation, energy security and critical infrastructure protection would be advantageous for Copenhagen. Poland's focus on 'hard security' offers valuable insights for Danish policymakers, whose traditional emphasis on 'soft security' has shifted since 2022.

Authors: **Izabela Surwillo, Senior Researcher izsu@diis.dk & Veronika Slakaityte, Analyst vesl@diis.dk**

Coverphoto: Shutterstock

All DIIS Policy Briefs are printed on Ecolabel and FSC certified paper