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Think Tanks Essentials

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ThinkTanks Essentials magazine was created to summarize and analyze the most important expert research, showing how it shapes our understanding of the global order.

This magazine is useful for anyone seeking to navigate the increasingly complex world of international politics. It allows readers to track key trends and the reasoning of leading experts who influence government and international organization decisions. For researchers and students, it serves as a convenient source of analysis and up-to-date case studies; for diplomats and specialists, it provides a tool for understanding global processes and anticipating possible scenarios; and for the general audience, it offers an opportunity to see the deeper context behind the headlines.

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Foreword

We have approached the preparation of this issue with profound responsibility. As always, the edition features up-to-date analytics from leading European think tanks, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the structural shifts in modern international relations.

Estonian experts examine the prospects of EU enlargement in the geopolitical dimension, alongside the inherent risks of 'managed unpredictability' within transatlantic relations. Regarding the potential appointment of a special envoy for negotiations with Russia, the analysis questions the European Union's capacity for substantive influence on security processes, moving beyond more symbolic presence. A separate analytical block addresses strategic instability and arms control. Furthermore, a number of materials demonstrate how the war in Ukraine is reshaping not only the security, but also the technological and economic paradigms of Europe. A study by IFRI on the military-technical transformation of warfare analyzes the large-scale deployment of drones and digital battle management platforms. A report from RUSI exposes the role of the shadow crypto-economy in sustaining the Russian war machine. Bruegel focuses on the EU's artificial intelligence strategy, underscoring the link between technological policy and strategic autonomy.

However, what indeed distinguishes this issue is the inclusion of analytical research from two major Polish think tanks: the Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM) and the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW). Their materials provide insight into Warsaw's strategic thinking on issues such as arms control, NATO transformation, global competition, the role of the US, the war in Ukraine, and new formats for international coordination. These think tanks shape the intellectual landscape of Polish foreign and security policy, and their assessments are increasingly serving as benchmarks for the broader European discourse.

Today Poland serves as a strategic logistical hub for supporting Ukraine, an advocate for its European integration, an active participant in the formation of new approaches to economic security, energy resilience, defense cooperation, and sanctions policy. This is why a cornerstone of this issue is the analytical article: "Poland and Ukraine's in Europe's New Economic Security Architecture: Strategic Partnership Amidst War and the EU transformation".

Analytics from February 2026 demonstrates that the European expert community increasingly considers security, economics, technology, and EU enlargement as interconnected elements of a unified strategic process. Specifically within this framework the Polish perspective becomes particularly salient, combining regional experience with a broader vision for the future of Europe.

The State of EU Enlargement at the Outset of 2026: On The Brink of Major Breakthroughs

Steven Blockmans, Michael Emerson, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
02.02.2026

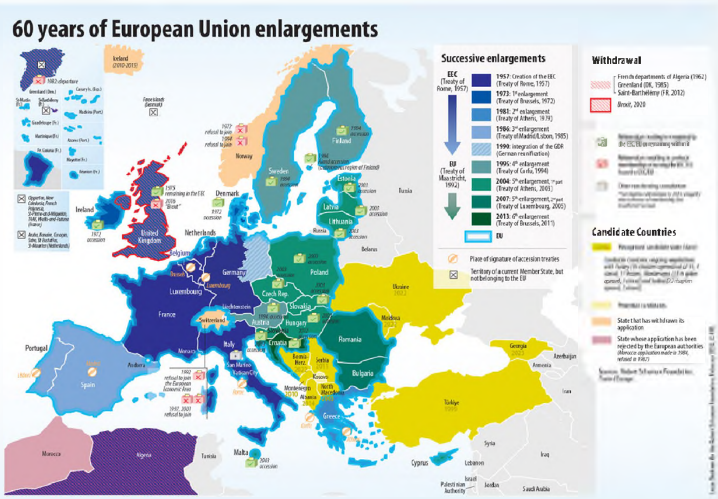
The authors assess the state of the EU enlargeent policy as of early 2026 on the basis of the Enlargement Package 2025 and their own quantitative methodology. The European Union is on the verge of a qualitative breakthrough in its expansion. However, this process is increasingly dictated by geopolitics rather than being solely a reflection of the candidates' technical progress.

The authors categorize the candidate states into four distinct groups: frontrunners (Montenegro, Albania), «key enlargement partners» (Moldova, Ukraine), stagnating states (North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and backsliding cases (Serbia, Georgia). On a readiness scale of 1 to 5, Montenegro leads with a score of 3.4, whereas Ukraine and Moldova hold positions of around 2.5. The authors contend that accession typically requires a threshold of approximately 4, corresponding to a level of 'good preparedness'.

A critical structural challenge remains the requirement for unanimity, whereby any stage of the accession negotiations can be effectively vetoed by an individual member state. Against this background, the European Council is already utilizing ad hoc mechanisms to circumvent such vetoes, particularly through Enhanced Cooperation.

The most contentious proposal remains the prospect of Ukraine's EU accession on January 1, 2027, which has emerged within the context of the U.S.-led peace plan. The authors regard such a timeline as unrealistic under current procedures. However, they propose an institutional innovation: the status of a 'Nominated Member State': an intermediate phase with full access to the EU policies but without full voting rights. This effectively means a transition towards a two-stage membership model.

Ultimately, the EU enlargement is progressively evolving into a pivotal instrument of grand geopolitical transformation, moving far beyond a mere administrative procedure.



European integration of Ukraine

Managed Unpredictability Is a Strategic Risk Multiplier for Europe

David Cattler, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
03.02.2026

The author analyses the transformation of the European security landscape through Herman Kahn's concept of 'rational irrationality' – the rational use of unpredictability as a tool of deterrence and coercion. The starting point is the new US National Defence Strategy 2026, which sent a clear message that Europe must take primary responsibility for its own defence, while US support will remain more limited. In this context, managed unpredictability ceases to be a rhetorical device and becomes a structural feature of alliance policy.

The author claims that the situation is currently being misinterpreted either as Washington exerting negotiating pressure or as a full-scale American withdrawal. In reality, the danger comes from elsewhere: uncertainty is being systematically generated as part of the strategic environment. The limits of escalation are becoming less clear, the time frames for decisions are narrowing, and signals from allies are becoming more frequent and less coordinated.

The case of Greenland demonstrates how strategic ambivalence can transform into a real crisis, provoking strategic reinsurance among allies and autonomous coordination outside NATO's standard mechanisms.

The main risk for Europe is not an inevitable war but the gradual erosion of deterrence: small rational steps, delays in decision-making and testing of 'grey areas'. The most vulnerable link is decision latency – the slowness of the consensus-based system of decision-making in conditions of accelerated strategic dynamics.

According to the author, the greatest danger is the assumption that controlled unpredictability would stabilize itself.

Editor's note: Russia's war against Ukraine is an example of testing the limits of escalation and the use of 'grey zones', where uncertainty and ambiguous signals create new opportunities for the aggressor. For Ukraine, in conditions of structural unpredictability, it is critically important to have a coordinated response from allies rather than a fragmented one, and it is also necessary to reduce delays in decision-making on security support.

European security

Conclusion of negotiations on the EU-India trade agreement

(pol. Zakończenie negocjacji umowy handlowej UE-Indie)

Patryk Kugiel, Damian Wnukowski, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
04.02.2026

Experts analyse the conclusion of negotiations on a free trade agreement between the EU and India, which have been ongoing since 2007 (with a break in 2013-2022) and have accelerated amid growing competition with China, protectionist measures by the US and the EU's desire to diversify its supply chains. Once in force, the agreement will create one of the largest free trade areas in the world, covering around 1.9 billion people and approximately 25% of global GDP.

The document provides for the liberalisation of 96.6% of EU exports to India and 99.3% of Indian exports to the EU. India will gradually abolish high tariffs on machinery (up to 44%), chemical products (22%), pharmaceuticals (11%) and reduce the tariff on cars from 110% to 10% within a quota. The European Commission estimates annual savings for EU businesses at around €4 billion and expects trade to double by 2032.

The agreement also expands access to the Indian services market, maintains the CBAM* mechanism, strengthens labour and environmental standards, and establishes a dispute settlement mechanism.

Regardless of concerns about competition in certain industries and the impact on the agricultural sector, the authors emphasise the complementarity of the EU and Indian economies. Strategically, the agreement should strengthen the EU's geo-economic position and gradually reduce India's dependence on Russia, which gives it additional significance in the context of the war in Ukraine.

Economy, trade, finance

*Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) – EU carbon adjustment mechanism for imports. If goods are produced in a country with less strict climate standards, an additional payment is made when importing them into the EU for carbon dioxide emissions associated with production. The EU-India trade agreement does not override the CBAM: Indian goods must also comply with EU climate requirements. – Ed. note.

Legitimacy Under Fire: How Ukraine Governs Without Elections

Reinhold Brender, Egmont Institute, Belgium
05.02.2026

This research analyses the main dilemma of Ukraine in the fifth year of the full-scale invasion: how to preserve democratic legitimacy under conditions of martial law and postponed elections. Formally, the postponement of the election adheres to the Constitution and objective war conditions. Nonetheless, legitimacy is the basis of mobilization, social resilience, Ukraine's negotiating position, and its accession to the EU.

The author introduces the concept of "reactive accountability" – crisis accountability, which works when civil society, independent anticorruption institutions, and EU conditionality act simultaneously. The events of 2025 in Ukraine, such as massive investigations in the energy sector and the attempt to limit the autonomy of anticorruption institutions, have shown that these mechanisms of crisis accountability can work even during the war. However, this model is reactive: it forestalls the rollback, but does not create a full political mandate.

Military centralization accelerates decision-making, but at the same time weakens institutional safeguards, deepens personalisation of power, and increases the risks of trust erosion. The paradox is that a renewed democratic mandate is essential for achieving a difficult peace, whereas the elections are possible only after the lifting of martial law.

Currently, the EU supports democratic standards in Ukraine, tying financial support to the implementation of reforms. The author emphasizes that external pressure can constrain the rollback, but it cannot replace electoral legitimacy. Transforming crisis accountability into robust institutional guarantees before the resumption of elections remains the core task.

Democratic Values

Washington has lost its way

Miguel Otero Iglesias, Elcano Royal Institute, Spain
06.02.2026

Following a series of meetings in Washington with members of Congress, the National Security Council, the Office of the US Trade Representative, the State Department, and leading tech companies, the author analyses the strategic logic of the US regarding China and its consequences for Europe.

First, during the current US administration, policy-making is getting concentrated in a narrow circle around the president. European diplomats acknowledge limited access to the real centers of decision-making, which contributes to strategic uncertainty and complicates transatlantic cooperation.

Second, despite the tough tariffs and export limitations, China is strengthening. It controls critical bottlenecks of the global economy, which include rare earths and pharmaceutical ingredients, whereas microchip restrictions only stimulated technological self-reliance. China's trade surplus reached $1,2 trillion in 2025, and by 2030, its share of global manufacturing could approach 45%.

Third, the MAGA foreign policy vision combines ideological dismantling of the liberal transatlantic order with the aspiration to geo-economic supremacy in the Western Hemisphere and the formation of a new trade architecture without China.

The author warns that the world is increasingly approaching the dynamics of a "Thucydides Trap", when reciprocal confidence in one's own systemic advantage can push both countries to a dangerous escalation.

It is expected that this year, the pressure from both the US and China will intensify, and for Europe, that means an urgent need to implement the Draghi Plan* and bolster its autonomy.

Economy, trade, finances; world order; EU strategic autonomy

*The so-called "Draghi Plan" is a 2024 strategic report of Mario Draghi on restoring EU competitiveness amid China's rise and US industrial policy. The document calls for massive investments in technologies, defence cooperation, energy and the deepening of the single market, so that Europe can act faster and with greater strategic autonomy . In this context, the author views it as an essential basis for strengthening the EU´s positions in global competition. - Ed. note

Suspension of the New START Treaty

(pol. Wygaśnięcie traktatu Nowy START)

Artur Kacprzyk, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland

06.02.2026

The author examines the implications of the expiration of the New START Treaty, which until 5 February 2026 remained the last functioning mechanism for controlling strategic nuclear arms between the United States and Russia. The treaty limited the number of deployed warheads and delivery systems, provided for reciprocal inspections and data exchanges, and thereby contributed to maintaining strategic stability.

The termination of the agreement resulted from a gradual erosion of the regime: since 2022, Russia had suspended inspections, and from 2023 ceased information sharing; at the same time, the United States advocated for a new framework that would include China, which has declined to participate despite the rapid expansion of its arsenal.

In the short term, an increase in the number of deployed warheads is anticipated as reserve stockpiles are utilized. A comprehensive modernization of strategic systems and the possible emergence of a renewed arms race may become more likely in the 2030s, particularly if missile defence programmes expand and deployments of intermediate-range missiles intensify.

For Europe, the implications are twofold. While New START did not directly regulate systems posing immediate threats to the European theatre, its absence contributes to broader strategic instability. With regard specifically to Poland, the treaty's expiration heightens the significance of the United States' nuclear presence in Europe. The analytical brief considers the possibility of expanding nuclear sharing arrangements, potentially including Poland, which could strengthen its role in deterring Russia. At the same time, in any future negotiations Moscow may seek limitations on or the withdrawal of U.S. nuclear infrastructure from NATO's eastern flank, a prospect that directly affects Poland's security interests.

European security

A special representative of Europe for Russia—to do what?

Kristi Raik, International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Estonia
09.02.2026

Currently, discussions are ongoing in Europe regarding the appointment of a special representative to take part in peace negotiations involving Russia, Ukraine, and the United States. However, the author suggests that such an initiative may be somewhat premature and demonstrates Europe's strategic uncertainty as a geopolitical actor.

First and foremost, it remains unclear what objective Europe ultimately seeks to pursue: a symbolic presence at the negotiating table or the restoration of dialogue with Moscow. Likewise, it is uncertain whether such a representative would be expected to apply pressure on Russia in pursuit of a sustainable peace, or, in practice, to encourage Ukraine toward further concessions. At the same time, neither Russia nor the United States has demonstrated clear interest in a European presence, which raises questions about the practical feasibility of this initiative.

The author emphasizes that Moscow is not currently under sufficient pressure and continues to advance maximalist demands, including full control over the Donbas. Ukraine, for its part, has indicated its willingness to agree to a ceasefire along the existing front line, which already constitutes a significant political concession; however, any further territorial losses remain unacceptable.

Under present circumstances, a European presence at the negotiating table would not in itself guarantee meaningful influence over the outcome. Without adequate leverage, such participation could risk association with an arrangement that fails to ensure long-term stability. Accordingly, the decisive factors remain the strengthening of sanctions, sustained military support for Ukraine, and the development of Europe's own defence capabilities, rather than the pursuit of diplomatic representation alone.

War in Ukraine; European security

Countries react to invitations to join the Board of Peace

(pol. Reakcje państw na zaproszenie do Rady Pokoju)

Stefania Kolarz, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
10.02.2026

The author analyzes international reactions to the initiative of the Donald Trump administration to create the Board of Peace – a new format proposed as part of the 20-point plan for Gaza and approved by the UN Security Council in November 2025. Although initially linked to resolving the situation in Gaza, the publicly released charter of the Board indicates a potentially broader mandate and a significant role for the Board's chair, namely Donald Trump, who effectively determines its composition and direction of activities.

The invitation to participate functions as a political signal: for some countries, it signifies recognition of the importance of their relationship with the United States, while the absence or withdrawal of an invitation is perceived as a sign of tension. States that accepted are motivated by a desire to maintain or strengthen ties with the Trump administration, avoid possible negative consequences of refusal, or use the format to bolster their own international position. At the same time, several Western countries declined, citing the risk of marginalizing the UN, inconsistencies with the Security Council resolution, and concerns over the dominant role of the United States.

As of 10 February 2026, 27 countries had confirmed participation in the Board of Peace, including Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, and Belarus. Twenty one states, including Poland and Ukraine, had not yet made a final decision. Several Western European countries, including Germany, France, Spain, and the United Kingdom, declined to participate.

World order; war in Ukraine

The European archipelago: Building bridges in a post-Western Europe

Célia Belin, Pawel Zerka, European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR), EU-level think tank
11.02.2026

This study is based on the results of a large-scale survey conducted in November 2025 (13 countries, over 16,000 respondents) and describes contemporary Europe as an "archipelago" of fragmented political sentiments. European public opinion is divided and structured into six groups that assess the role of the United States, the need to strengthen defense, and the future of the EU in different ways.

The authors identify pro-European "euro-hawks" who support strategic autonomy and increased defense spending; "euro-doves" who tend to defend the EU but are skeptical of militarization; "atlanticists" who still view the United States as an ally; nationalists and radically anti-system voters ("renegades"); as well as a small but distinct group of "Trumpists" who sympathize with Trump's political style and agenda.

The study shows that awareness of new geopolitical risks in Europe is growing, but does not translate into a coherent political coalition. Skepticism toward the United States and support for strengthening defense coexist, yet they overlap only partially across different voter groups.

Against this backdrop, the authors outline three possible political coalitions. They consider the most promising to be the "values coalition" consisting of euro-hawks, euro-doves, and atlanticists, combining commitment to European integration with pragmatic defense reinforcement. By contrast, a eurosceptic coalition could undermine the EU's internal cohesion.

Unfortunately, for Ukraine this may mean that support is not automatically guaranteed and will largely depend on which configuration of political forces dominates in Europe.

Illustration by Chris Eichberger

European Union

Mapping the MilTech War: Eight Lessons from Ukraine's Battlefield

Élie Tenenbaum, Bohdan Kostiuk, Daryna-Maryna Patiuk, Anastasya Shapochkina, Institut français des relations internationales (IFRI), France
12.02.2026

The war in Ukraine has emerged as a testing ground for the technological transformation of contemporary armed conflict. At the forefront of this shift is an integrated technological ecosystem – encompassing unmanned systems, specialized software, satellite communications, and artificial intelligence. This environment has fostered a new "economics of lethality", where the primary metric of success is the cost-to-effect ratio of strike capabilities.

The authors highlight eight key shifts. First and foremost is the massive "dronization" of the war: in 2025, up to 70–80% of all strikes on the front line are carried out by drones, including FPV and fiber-optic models that are resistant to electronic jamming. A major factor has been the integration of artificial intelligence, which significantly shortens the time between detecting a target and hitting it. This creates a model of synergy between humans and technology, where algorithms support but do not replace the operator's decisions. Additionally, maritime unmanned systems have allowed Ukraine to implement a sea denial* strategy without a conventional naval fleet, while digital combat platforms (like Delta) have changed the logic of command by focusing on information processing and reducing the mental burden on personnel.

The analysis specifically highlights that mass-produced, relatively inexpensive drones are undermining the effectiveness of costly missile systems, forcing a rethink of air defense strategies. Ukraine is emerging as a prime example of an adaptive DefTech ecosystem, where the government, the military, and the private sector work together to rapidly integrate innovations into combat operations.

The authors are convinced that superiority in future conflicts will depend on technological scaling, the speed of adaptation, and the resilience of supply chains, rather than the quantity of conventional military equipment.

War in Ukraine

* Sea denial – is a military term that refers to the strategy of preventing an opponent from operating safely within a maritime zone. In Ukraine's case, this means that the use of drones, missiles, and electronic warfare forced Russia to withdraw its fleet and stripped it of its freedom of action in the Black Sea. – Ed. note.

Arctic Sentry: NATO strengthens its polar flank

Piotr Szymański, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Poland
13.02.2026

On February 11, 2026, NATO launched "Arctic Sentry", an expanded multi-domain mission on its northern flank. Its official goal is to bolster defense and deterrence in the Arctic amid increasing Russian military activity and a growing Chinese presence. To some extent, the launch also serves as a response to President Donald Trump's comments regarding potential U.S. control over Greenland. Since the Arctic represents the shortest route for potential Russian missile or air strikes against the United States, NATO aims to demonstrate that American security can be effectively maintained through collective monitoring and deterrence efforts.

Arctic Sentry does not involve establishing a new permanent military presence. Instead, it focuses primarily on coordinating existing allied activities and strengthening capabilities in intelligence, surveillance, and monitoring, particularly concerning the operations of the Russian Northern Fleet. The mission draws on the planned Arctic Endurance and Cold Response exercises, with Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and the United Kingdom already participating. The United States and Canada support the initiative through NORAD, EUCOM, and NORTHCOM.

Despite this, Arctic Watch does not resolve the Greenland issue, as trilateral talks between Washington, Copenhagen, and Nuuk are ongoing in parallel. For European allies, it is vital that strengthening the northern dimension does not lead to resources being spread too thin, especially while the eastern flank is being reinforced and possible commitments to a stabilization mission in Ukraine are considered. Ultimately, NATO's overall effectiveness in deterring Russia depends on maintaining internal unity.

Transatlantic relations; international security

What Role for Europe on the Global Chessboard?

(fr. Quelle place pour l'Europe sur le grand échiquier du monde ?)

Frédéric Mauro, Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques (IRIS), France

13.02.2026

Frédéric Mauro's analysis offers a strategic assessment of the European Union's position in the emerging geopolitical landscape. The author starts from the premise that the world has irreversibly changed: transatlantic relations can no longer be taken for granted, while U.S. isolationism and the strategic reorientation of American interests toward Asia represent structural, long-term trends. Under these conditions, despite its economic weight, the EU remains a politically weak and militarily constrained actor.

The European Union has neither completed its economic integration, nor established a truly unified foreign policy, nor developed autonomous defense capabilities. As a result, it risks shifting from being a subject of geopolitics to becoming its object under pressure from Russia, revisionist tendencies in the United States, and China's growing strategic influence. The war against Ukraine served as a shock for Europe, compelling Member States to reassess their security assumptions and the necessity of strategic autonomy.

The author formulates a key equation of European power: political will × decision-making capacity × ability to act. If any one of these elements is missing, geopolitical influence equals zero. The conclusion is straightforward yet harsh: if it is to avoid remaining a pawn on the grand chessboard, Member States must address the question of deeper political integration – whether within the framework of the existing treaties or beyond them. Otherwise, the economic giant will continue to remain strategically powerless.

EU strategic autonomy

The West vs. the West at the Munich Security Conference

Bronwen Maddox, Chatham House, United Kingdom
15.02.2026

13–15 February 2026, the annual global forum on international security took place – the Munich Security Conference. The author characterizes the atmosphere of this year's conference as "the West vs. the West" – a visible rift between the United States and its traditional allies.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio sought to soften the sharp rhetoric of earlier statements from the American leadership, emphasizing that Europe's future remains important to Washington. At the same time, he clearly outlined the limits of U.S. support for Ukraine and Europe, signaling that if allies fail to take American interests into account, the administration will act independently. In parallel, China reaffirmed its strategic rivalry with the United States and sharply criticized Japan for its support of Taiwan.

Meanwhile, European leaders are attempting to balance the preservation of transatlantic unity with the strengthening of their own strategic autonomy. Volodymyr Zelenskyy used the conference platform to draw attention to the ongoing war and to call for continued military assistance.

Support for Ukraine is increasingly becoming an indicator of the depth of the transatlantic divide. The central "elephant in the room"* is the question of trust among allies: will the West remain capable of acting collectively, or will geopolitical competition fragment it into a set of separate national strategies?

World order; international security

*The symbol of this year's Munich Security Conference was an elephant: screens in the halls and corridors showed images of the large animal moving slowly and awkwardly toward the viewer. In English, the expression "elephant in the room" refers to an obvious but uncomfortable problem that everyone sees but avoids discussing openly. The author of the analytical commentary also points out that the elephant is the symbol of the US Republican Party, which adds additional political subtext to the image. – Ed. note

Temporary Protection at a Crossroads: Direct Effect, Social Assistance, and Post-TPD Legal Pathways

Marta Barandiy, Egmont Institute, Belgium
17.02.2026

In March 2022, the EU's temporary protection mechanism was activated for Ukrainians. The initial directive was an example of effective supranational solidarity: the EU quickly provided legal status, access to residence and social support on an unprecedented scale. However, three years later, this mechanism is turning into a test of the resilience of EU law.

The author demonstrates that national administrative practices increasingly subordinate EU individual guarantees to national social security rules. The most telling example is the case of Belgium, where cohabitation with relatives is interpreted as proof of sufficient resources, effectively shifting responsibility from the state to private households. As a result, the common European mechanism begins to work differently in different countries.

The author also emphasizes the gender dimension: the financial and psychological burden is often borne by women who have taken in relatives, while effective appeal mechanisms remain limited. The European Commission's reaction demonstrates the vulnerability of the directive's enforcement mechanisms.

As the temporary protection mechanism approaches its expiry in 2027, the EU faces a major risk. For example, without an agreed transitional mechanism, millions of people could lose their status and access to basic protection systems at the same time. The future of temporary protection thus becomes a test of the Union's ability to uphold supranational rights in a protracted crisis.

Migration policy

China's alleged violation of the moratorium on nuclear tests

(pol. Domniemane złamanie przez Chiny moratorium na testy nuklearne)

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland

17.02.2026

The author analyzes US allegations that China conducted a covert, low-yield nuclear test in June 2020 using a "decoupling" technique that reduces seismic signals and makes detection more difficult. These are the most serious US remarks against Beijing since the signing of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty in 1996.

It is emphasized that the technical capabilities of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty Organization and the intelligence capabilities of the United States significantly limit the chances of conducting a completely covert test, but there is no conclusive evidence, and an interpretation mistake cannot be ruled out. At the same time, the accusations fit into the broader context of the modernization of the Chinese arsenal, as it is known that Beijing plans to increase the number of warheads to about a thousand by 2030 and may be interested in low-yield charges for regional systems and hypersonic carriers. At the same time, modern computer simulations and experiments without a full nuclear explosion make it possible to modernize warheads without resuming full-scale tests.

The author sees the situation as part of a general erosion of arms control regimes. Activity at Russian and US test sites, the conclusion of bilateral agreements, and political signals from Washington increase the risk of renewed nuclear testing by major powers. In the long term, this could encourage further proliferation of nuclear weapons to more states, including North Korea and Iran, and exacerbate discussions about nuclear safeguards among US allies. Thus, even an unconfirmed test becomes a factor of strategic instability.

International security

Veterans are changing Ukraine

(pol. Weterani zmieniają Ukrainę)

Maria Piechowska, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM), Poland
18.02.2026

The author analyzes the growing role of veterans in Ukraine's post-war transformation. As of 2026, there are approximately 1.5 million veterans in the country, with at least 130,000 living with disabilities; after the war, this group – including their family members – could comprise 15–20% of the population. The author emphasizes that veterans' involvement in civic and political life will be a decisive factor in the state's development, regardless of the peace settlement.

The primary challenge lies in large-scale socio-economic reintegration. Healthcare and social support systems are already overloaded, particularly regarding psychological assistance. Businesses remain unprepared to accommodate veterans suffering from PTSD, while regional disparities in support exacerbate the risk of social frustration. In a context of widespread societal militarization and weapon proliferation, failed integration could create risks of radicalization.

At the same time, veterans possess significant political potential: with the Armed Forces enjoying a trust rating of over 90%, the path is open for military leaders to wield greater political influence. The effectiveness of veteran policies will shape not only social stability but also the long-term resilience of Ukrainian democracy.

The regional dimension is equally critical. According to the author, should the situation stabilize, some Ukrainian families may reunite abroad, particularly in Poland, leading to an inflow of veterans. This poses risks of social friction that could be exploited by Russian disinformation. Consequently, there is an emphasis on the need to coordinate support through NATO mechanisms and to include veteran affairs into Ukraine's reconstruction plans.

War in Ukraine

A fast-tracked Ukraine EU accession by 2027? Here are three dilemmas

Janis A. Emmanouilidis, European Policy Centre (EPC), EU-level think tank
18.02.2026

The author analyzes the idea of accelerating Ukraine's accession to the EU by 2027, even without the formal completion of all technical criteria. Four years into Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, Kyiv's membership is increasingly viewed not as a long-term prospect but as a matter of geopolitical necessity and the Union's own security.

The author supports the strategic logic of acceleration but cautions that urgency should not undermine the EU's fundamental principles. The issue is not only the speed of enlargement but also preserving the substance of membership itself. If accelerated integration results in limited representation or reduced influence of new member states in decision-making, it would set a precedent of "membership with reservations" and undermine the principle of equality among member states. Temporary transitional mechanisms are possible, but they must be clearly defined and politically credible, so as not to become permanent exceptions.

An equally risky scenario, the author notes, is one where Ukraine receives a personal accession path while Western Balkan countries or Moldova are bypassed. Selective enlargement would weaken trust in a rules-based process. Moreover, enlargement is impossible without internal adaptation of the Union: an EU with over 30 members will require changes in decision-making procedures, budgetary architecture, and collective action mechanisms.

Ultimately, combining enlargement with reforms could become an opportunity for the EU's strategic renewal and better adaptation to new challenges.

European integration of Ukraine

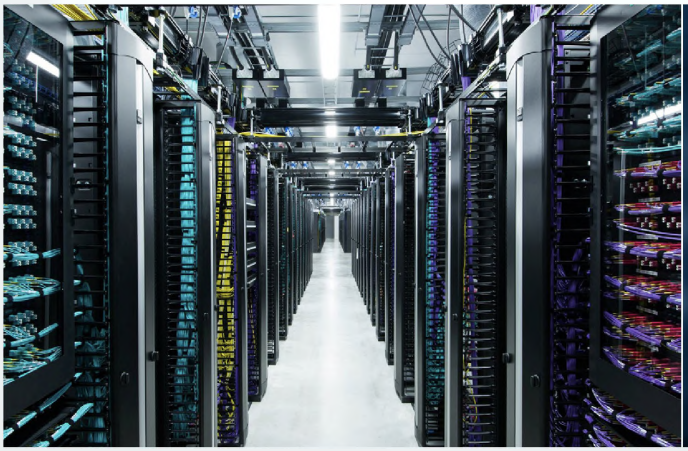
Europe's artificial intelligence strategy should be built on European strengths

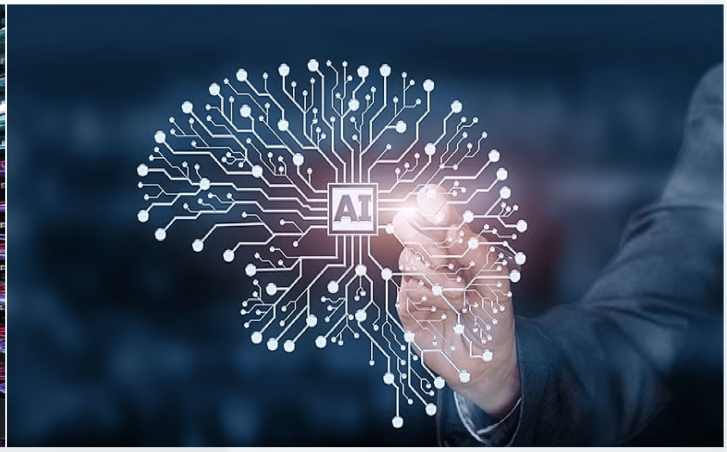
Mario Mariniello, Bruegel, EU-level think tank
19.02.2026

The EU's new artificial intelligence strategy aims to support European companies in building advanced AI models by expanding access to data and investing in data centers, semiconductors and network infrastructure. The main goal is to reduce dependency on the US and China while preserving strategic autonomy. However, the author considers this course to be risky and internally inconsistent.

The author warns that the desire to catch up with the US could force the EU to compromise its own principles. Relaxing rules on the use of sensitive data risks weakening the protection of citizens. And supporting large European companies through protectionist instruments, such as special conditions for public procurement or softer antitrust controls, undermines the open-market principles on which the EU is built. A company's geographic origin does not in itself ensure alignment with European values. The key to autonomy is not protectionism, but the consistent and uniform application of the law, in particular the AI Act.

At the same time, the author questions the advisability of focusing on developing the most powerful basic models. The advantage in this area is temporary. Instead,Europe stands to gain more from integrating AI into industry, public administration and small and medium-sized businesses. A mix of regulation, competition and support for open technological solutions offers a path to sustainable and truly European digital autonomy.





Economy; artificial intelligence

The power of the few: How clusters can strengthen European defence

Luigi Scazzieri, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), EU-level think tank
20.02.2026

According to the author, the most realistic way to strengthen European defence at present is the development of small defence clusters. In the face of the growing threat from Russia and uncertainty about the future role of the US, Europe needs deeper and faster frameworks for cooperation between national armed forces.

The author shows that bilateral and minilateral frameworks have already proven their effectiveness. The integration of the naval forces of Belgium and the Netherlands, the inclusion of the Dutch land forces in the structures of Germany, formats such as NORDEFCO, as well as coalitions of states coordinating the provision of specific military capabilities to Ukraine are telling examples. Small groups of states are better able to coordinate joint procurement, standardisation and operational interoperability, while pan-European mechanisms are often hampered by differences in planning, threat assessments and industrial interests.

Despite the risks of fragmentation, the author considers clusters to be the main driver of defence development. The EU can help them work more effectively by providing funding, coordination and common cooperation framework, transforming disparate initiatives into a more coherent defense ecosystem.

In this model, Ukraine becomes not only a catalyst for cooperation, but also a potential participant in post-war security formats, making deeper integration possible even before formal EU membership.

EU strategic autonomy; European security

The Shadow Crypto Economy Feeding Russia's War Machine

Gonzalo Sais Erausquin, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), United Kingdom
20.02.2026

Cryptocurrencies, primarily stablecoins, have become an integral element of the Russian military procurement model. Despite an unprecedented sanctions regime that limited Moscow's access to SWIFT, dollar and euro settlements, Russia has not stopped importing critical components for weapons. Instead, it has adapted by combining diversified transit routes with parallel crypto financial infrastructure.

Stablecoins, specifically USDT, allow for dollar-like transactions outside the sanctioned banking system. A key role is played by Russian exchanges (Garantex and its successors), payment agents and the ruble-secured A7A5 token, which functions as a "bridge" between the ruble and global crypto markets. In less than a year, the A7A5 processed tens of billions of dollars in transactions, indicating the scale of integration of crypto tools into the procurement model.

The most vulnerable link of control remains OTC brokers, which work through trust networks and thousands of wallets, making it difficult to attribute payments. The author proves that although the sanctions changed routes and increased costs, they did not stop purchases. In order to realistically limit Russian military capabilities, a transition from point sanctions to a network approach is needed, integrating trade analysis, financial intelligence and pressure on crypto infrastructure.

Economy, trade, finance

Poland and Ukraine in the new architecture of economic security of Europe: a strategic partnership in the conditions of war and transformation of the EU

Kateryna Nedashkivska, author and manager of "Think Tanks Essentials"

Executive Summary:

- Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine became a catalyst for a deep revision of the concept of economic security of the European Union. While it used to boil down mainly to energy diversification and financial stability, after 2022 it covers supply chains, defense industry, critical infrastructure, sanctions mechanisms and technological sustainability. The 2023 European Economic Security Strategy cemented this shift by emphasising that the economic capacity to withstand external coercion is an integral part of the EU's security.
- In this new context, the Polish-Ukrainian partnership was transformed from a manifestation of political solidarity into a structural element of the new architecture of Europe's stability. Poland has become a key logistics and transit hub of support for Ukraine, ensuring the functioning of land corridors for export and supply of aid. At the same time an integrated defense-industrial dimension of cooperation is being formed: Ukraine demonstrates a high speed of innovation in the field of military technologies, and Poland acts as an important partner in the production, repair and modernization of weapons.
- Energy restructuring and sanctions policies complement this transformation. Poland quickly eliminated dependence on Russian energy carriers and became an energy hub for Ukraine, while consistently advocating increased sanction pressure on Russia.
- At the institutional level, Warsaw plays the role of a key advocate for Ukraine's European integration, which was confirmed by the decision to start accession negotiations at the end of 2023.
- The further dynamics of the partnership will depend on the course of the war and the internal cohesion of the EU. Most desirable is a scenario of enhanced integration that would strengthen the Union's eastern flank; at the same time, risks of fragmentation or war fatigue could slow down this process.
- The partnership between Warsaw and Kyiv today is a strategic investment in the long-term sustainability of Europe. It combines the logistical, defence, energy and institutional dimensions into a single regional security framework, the success of which depends on the EU's ability to act as a consolidated geopolitical actor.

I. Economic security as part of the new EU architecture

Before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, economic security in the EU was understood relatively narrowly – mainly as a matter of diversifying energy sources and protecting certain industries from external shocks. For example, after the gas crises of 2006 and 2009, the focus was energy security, and after the financial crisis – the stability of the eurozone. However, other aspects, like the defence industry or logistics, have hardly been addressed through the security lens. Trade policy and security policy existed separately.

2022 was a turning point. Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine has forced the EU to rethink its strategic vulnerability. It became clear that economic dependence could be turned into a weapon, because Russia was blackmailing Europe with gas, and failures in the supply of critical goods became a threat to stability. In response, the EU formally declared a course to protect economic security, including supply chains, infrastructure and critical technologies, from any external pressure or blackmail.

As a result, new priorities have appeared on the EU agenda. Such a paradigm shift was enshrined in the European Economic Security Strategy in June 2023. The document identifies four categories of risks: supply chain vulnerability, technological security and data leakage, infrastructure threats and economic coercion. So now it is about the fact that security – is not only a military defense, but also the ability of the economy to withstand pressure.

In this context, it is important to consider Poland and Ukraine, which have directly experienced new challenges to economic security. Poland is a member state of the EU and NATO, the territory of which has become a key rear for the supply of aid to Ukraine. Ukraine is a state that defends itself from aggression and at the same time integrates into the European economic space at an accelerated pace. Both states had to quickly adapt to the conditions of war.

At the end of 2023, the European Council made a historic decision to start negotiations on Ukraine's accession to the EU. The move politically cemented the fact that Ukraine's economic and political destiny is an integral part of the future European security architecture. From now on, the cooperation between Warsaw and Kyiv goes beyond bilateral relations. Poland, as one of Ukraine's main allies in the EU, considers Kyiv's support as an investment in the region's own security and stability. Thus, the Polish-Ukrainian partnership becomes a systemic element of the new economic security architecture of Europe, which is formed under the influence of war and geopolitical changes.

II. Poland as a strategic rear and logistics hub of European sustainability

From the first days of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the territory of Poland turned into the main transit corridor through which the West arms the Ukrainian army. More than 95% of all military and humanitarian aid for Ukraine comes from more than 40 countries of the world through the Rzeszów-Jasyonka hub. The President of Poland, Karol Navrotsky, noted that the defense of Ukraine both at the beginning of the war and now largely became possible thanks to the efforts of the Polish people, Polish soldiers and the existence of such logistics centers in Poland.

Poland effectively became the "rear" of European defense, providing the infrastructure for the rapid transfer of forces and assets to NATO's eastern flank. Also under the bilateral Ukrainian-Polish agreement signed in 2024, Poland committed to keeping the logistics hub fully operational and to further ensure the effective supply of arms to Ukraine.

The war also turned traditional trade routes around. Ukraine lost access to part of its Black Sea ports, so the Polish-Ukrainian corridor became critically important for Ukraine's economic survival. In May 2022, the EU launched the "Solidarity Paths" initiative to export Ukrainian grain and import necessary goods by land and river through neighboring countries. Poland – is a key link of these ways. To cope with such a load, Poland has undertaken an accelerated expansion of border infrastructure.

The railway connection between the two countries has increased capacity: in 2023, the operation of the Khrebenne–Rava-Ruska border railway station was resumed. The Polish side is modernizing the tracks and railway junctions, building additional transshipment terminals for quick change of wheel pairs of cars of different tracks. Electronic border queue reservation systems are being implemented on highways to reduce truck queues. New checkpoints are created and existing – are expanded to ensure that goods move without delay.

The Polish seaports of Gdansk, Gdynia, and Szczecin received significant investments. According to estimates by the Polish Ministry of Agriculture, the combined capacity of Polish ports to tranship Ukrainian grain in 2023 increased to 12.6 million tons per year. This became possible thanks to new equipment and organization of work around the clock.

Such economic adaptation brought benefits to Poland itself, because the increase in transit means additional revenues for Polish transport companies, railways, and ports. It is clear that Poland, as a transit state, bears the costs (infrastructure wear, social burden), but also receives significant economic dividends from its role as a strategic rear.

By strengthening ties with Ukraine, Warsaw is at the same time strengthening its status as a leader in the region. Deepening economic integration with Ukraine means for Poland the expansion of a large sales market for goods with high added value, access to high-quality raw materials, as well as establishing itself as a regional economic and logistics hub.

But at the same time, such a role carries risks. One of the most important – is the risk of overloading infrastructure and administrative capabilities. Polish highways, borders, railways work under great pressure, which requires constant investment and modernization. There are queues at the border, which sometimes reach tens of kilometers. The EU allocates funding to improve the capacity of the Polish-Ukrainian border, but the process of infrastructure development is long. Without adequate support from the entire EU, Poland could face a logistical crisis when its networks cannot cope with transit volumes. Successful overcoming of these problem areas turns Poland into an important strategic player.

In conclusion, Poland, in response to new challenges, has moved from the role of a transit country to a systemic element of the region's economic security. It ensures the sustainability of supplies and support for Ukraine, while strengthening its own position in the EU.

III. Cooperation in the defense-industrial sphere as the basis of joint stability

A full-scale war became a powerful impetus for the revival of the defense-industrial complex both in Ukraine and in European countries. For the EU, Russian aggression highlighted the dangerous dependence on external supplies of weapons and ammunition and the long-term underfunding of its own defense industries. So now a kind of reindustrialization of the defense sector is taking place: NATO member states are massively increasing defense budgets and opening new production lines. For the first time in its history, the EU began to finance the supply of lethal weapons through the European Peace Fund. Also in 2023, the Act in Support of Ammunition Production was adopted with a budget of €500 million, aimed at increasing the production of ammunition in Europe.

Meanwhile, Ukraine actually made an industrial breakthrough. During the war, its defense industry turned into a fast-growing sector, which is already considered one of the pillars of future European security. It is estimated that Ukraine has already produced between 2.5 and 4 million drones of various types in 2025 and plans to produce up to 7 million in 2026. Dozens of start-ups have emerged in the field of high-tech weapons (kamikaze drones, EW systems, combat management software) which, thanks to military expertise, have short cycles of innovation, so what in peacetime would take years is done in months. All this is actually happening in real time in the conditions of regular Russian shelling.

At the same time, the main problem of the Ukrainian military-industrial complex is limited internal resources and infrastructure in wartime conditions. Therefore, the involvement of European partners in cooperation was a logical step. European governments, realizing the potential of Ukrainian developments, began to finance the production of Ukrainian weapons in their country for further transfer to Ukraine. Cooperation with Denmark and Germany is already available, similar models are also being deployed in Lithuania, the Czech Republic, and Great Britain. In fact, Ukraine has become part of the EU's defense production. This creates a unique synergy between Ukrainian innovations and the European industrial base, which works to strengthen collective security.

Poland, as one of the closest allies, took a leading place in the process of defense-industrial cooperation with Ukraine. First, Warsaw became one of the main donors of weapons for the Armed Forces. Poland handed over hundreds of units of heavy weapons – tanks, Krab self-propelled howitzers, air defense, MiG-29 fighters, thousands of MANPADS and ATGMs, and millions of cartridges to Ukraine. As of February 2025, it was known that in total, for the years 2022-2024, Poland provided military aid to Ukraine in the amount of €3.5 billion.

Secondly, the Polish defense industry establishes joint production and repair of weapons with Ukrainian partners. In April 2023, the state concern "Ukroboronprom" and the Polish Polska Grupa Zbrojeniowa agreed on the joint production of 125-mm tank shells for Soviet-style tanks. New production lines will be deployed in Polish cities, while technologies and specialists are provided by Ukraine, and investments by Poland. Poland also took part in the release of ammunition for the Armed Forces on its territory. In addition, the Polish plant Bumar-Łabędy together with "Ukroboronprom" opened a maintenance and repair center for Ukrainian T-64 tanks and other Soviet-style equipment in Poland. Cooperation also covers other areas: joint development of new types of weapons, exchange of technologies, personnel training. Ukrainian specialists in defense technologies, who have gained unique combat experience, advise Polish colleagues on improving weapons. There are already talks about the possible placement of branches of Polish defense plants in Ukraine after the war in order to use Ukrainian personnel potential.

Cooperation between Ukraine and Poland in the defense sphere is part of a wider transformation of the European defense economy. Without the integration of Ukrainian potential, it will be difficult for Europe to quickly increase its own capabilities. Ukraine has unique combat experience, engineering solutions and the ability to create effective systems in a short time. Therefore, strengthening its defense-industrial base is increasingly seen as an investment in the long-term security of the continent. The EU is already taking steps in this direction. Ukraine's participation in certain programs of the European Union opens access to financing of infrastructure and security projects, as well as to potential involvement in defense initiatives. Poland consistently advocates the integration of Ukrainian enterprises into European supply chains.

At the same time, it is impossible not to mention that the war actualized the discussion about the strategic autonomy of Europe, given its dependence on the United States in the field of advanced weapons. The experience of Poland, which is actively modernizing its own military industry, and Ukraine, which is creating modern drones and missile systems in combat conditions, complement each other. The initiative to create export hubs of Ukrainian defense products in Europe will contribute to joint production, technology transfer and standardization according to the requirements of NATO and the EU. In this way, a bilateral process of integration is formed: Ukraine enters the European market, and Europe gains access to proven combat technologies.

Thus, the Polish-Ukrainian military industry plays a dual role. On the one hand, it meets the urgent needs of war – weapons arrive at the front faster, equipment is repaired, ammunition is produced. On the other hand, – lays the foundation for decades to come. An integrated defense complex of the entire region is gradually being formed, where Ukraine, together with its allies, will play an important role. This strengthens the resilience of the entire European area against potential threats.

IV. Energy transformation and sanctions policy in Europe's economic security architecture

A full-scale war launched the process of Europe's decisive rejection of dependence on Russian energy carriers. The European Union imposed an embargo on imports of Russian coal and oil, and significantly reduced imports of Russian pipeline gas. Importantly, Poland, along with the Baltic states, was among the first to demand a full energy embargo as early as March 2022. Already in April 2022, shortly after the full-scale invasion, Poland unilaterally refused to pay to "Gazprom" for gas in rubles, due to which the supply of Russian gas to it was stopped. By the end of 2022, Poland completely stopped importing Russian coal and oil. And thus, Poland was one of the first among EU countries to eliminate its long-term dependence on Russian energy carriers.

Instead, new energy projects and partnerships were deployed. In October 2022, the Baltic Pipe gas pipeline became operational, supplying Poland with Norwegian gas through Denmark and actually replacing supplies from Russia. The capacity of the LNG terminal in Swinoujsca, where gas comes from the USA, Qatar and other partners, has also been expanded. Part of these volumes is sent to Ukraine by reverse. The 2024 Polish-Ukrainian security agreement states that the parties are working to ensure reliable capacity for the transportation of natural gas from Poland to Ukraine, including the supply of liquefied natural gas from Polish LNG terminals.

In the electric power industry, the turning point was the synchronization of the Ukrainian power system with ENTSO-E on March 16, 2022. In a few weeks, Ukraine joined the European network, and the Polish operator PSE supported the technical stability of this process. Since then, Ukraine can import electricity from the EU during crises and export it during periods of surplus. Poland supplied electricity during blackouts, transmitted generators, transformers, communication systems and was involved in the restoration of networks together with "Ukrenergo".

Therefore, cooperation thus reached a strategic level. Poland has become a key energy hub for Ukraine through which gas and electricity flow, while Ukraine is gradually integrating into the European market as a potential exporter. Both countries have reduced their dependence on Russia and are jointly strengthening the region's energy security.

The second key front of the economic confrontation with Russia was international sanctions. Since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, Poland has advocated the strictest restrictions – from disconnecting Russian banks from SWIFT to the oil and gas embargo. As a result, the EU has already adopted 19 packages of sanctions of an unprecedented scale: thousands of individuals and companies have been subject to restrictions, bans on the import of Russian resources and the export of high-tech products have been introduced, and about €300 billion reserves of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation have been frozen. Warsaw was among the most consistent supporters of strengthening sanctions, including advocating restrictions against "Rosatom" and criminalizing sanctions circumvention.

It is also important that Poland introduced national restrictions even before the decisions of Brussels: it froze Russian assets on its territory and banned Russian propaganda channels. In October 2024, with the active Polish support, the EU agreed on a new regime of sanctions for hybrid attacks by the Russian Federation, in particular against persons involved in election interference, cyber attacks, etc.

However, there are also problems of unity. Some EU countries are tired of sanctions war or have other interests. Hungary most openly opposes the new sanctions: it has repeatedly blocked or delayed their adoption, demanding exceptions for its interests (mostly energy interests). The Hungarian government also delayed the approval of €18 billion macro-financial aid to Ukraine. This caused sharp criticism from Poland. On the 4th anniversary of the full-scale war, Polish Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski publicly accused Budapest of undermining European solidarity by blocking sanctions and military funding for Ukraine, calling such actions outrageous and harmful to the security of both Poland and Europe. After all, the Polish position demonstrates a clear understanding that the security of Warsaw and Brussels is being decided on the battlefield in Ukraine today. Poland proves that the protection of Ukrainian interests is at the same time the protection of the fundamental values of the entire European community.

Ukraine, in turn, completely severed economic ties with Russia and refocused on the EU market, which provided duty-free access and significant financial support. Despite the war, the economy maintained relative stability thanks to the help of partners. Poland played an important role as an advocate for increased aid and as a country that received millions of Ukrainians.

It is also worth noting that economic security – is also about the ability to withstand a long sanctions war. European economies are experiencing costs (higher energy prices, loss of the Russian market), the enemy is counting on the exhaustion of the will of the West and is looking for detours. Nevertheless, Poland and Ukraine demonstrate resilience and remain among those who insist on consistent sanctions pressure. The goal should be a common – to deprive the Kremlin of resources to wage war, even if it requires sacrifices.

V. Institutional dimension: the Polish factor in Ukraine's integration into the EU

After Ukraine was granted candidate status in 2022, cooperation with the EU entered a new phase – of full harmonization of Ukrainian legislation with the acquis communautaire. In this process, Poland also became one of the key partners, sharing its own experience of the path of European integration in 2004. Warsaw provides expert assistance, supports the creation of regulatory institutions and the adaptation of norms, in particular in the field of agriculture, customs policy and the functioning of markets. At the same time, Polish diplomacy is actively promoting the topic of EU enlargement and considers the issue of Ukraine a priority in this context. In 2023, Warsaw, together with the Baltic states and the Czech Republic, published a position paper calling for negotiations with Ukraine to begin immediately, without waiting for the end of the war. Actually, thanks to this, at the end of 2023, a decision was made to start accession negotiations. Poland was also among those proposing innovative approaches on how to accelerate accession: phased integration, with Ukraine joining individual EU policies even before formal membership.

At the same time, the process of EU enlargement also has a complex economic dimension. In 2023, the Polish-Ukrainian partnership experienced a serious test in the form of a grain conflict. After the opening of "solidarity routes", part of the Ukrainian grain remained on the markets of neighboring countries, which caused concern among Polish farmers, as cheaper Ukrainian grain created competition for them. On the eve of the parliamentary elections, the Polish government, for reasons of domestic policy, banned the import of a number of Ukrainian agricultural goods. Ukraine, for its part, raised this issue at the EU level. Despite the emotionality of the discussion, the parties were able to find compromise solutions, in particular through export licensing mechanisms and reorientation of flows to transit. This case showed that integration requires a balance of interests and consideration of the internal socio-economic sensitivity of both sides.

Such cases are quite natural for the expansion process, because Ukraine is a large agricultural and industrial producer that will potentially affect the structure of the EU market. In the Polish-Ukrainian partnership, each of the parties protects its own economic interests. However, it is the maturity of relations that lies in the ability to resolve such conflicts without destroying strategic trust. Poland and Ukraine are currently demonstrating that they can reach compromises.

Another equally important challenge is the balance of power within the EU after the possible accession of Ukraine. Its accession will change the vote schedule and strengthen the Union's eastern flank. Poland sees this as a factor in strengthening Europe's security, but at the same time realizes the need for internal EU reforms and actively supports the idea of increasing the Union's budget and reforming institutions before the accession of new members.

Ukraine itself should also do its "homework" before joining the EU. Corruption, the rule of law, court reform – these issues will be urgent. Poland quite rightly warns Ukraine that membership cannot be granted without reforms in these areas.

So, the institutional dimension of the Polish-Ukrainian partnership – is a difficult game to anticipate possible risks. There is a common strategic vision: Ukraine should become a member of the EU, and this will strengthen Europe. But the way to this requires compromises, concessions and reforms both in the EU itself and in Ukraine. Poland plays the role of both "lawyer" and "mediator", and sometimes "arbitrator" between Ukraine's interests and EU demands. The maturity of the partnership is manifested in the fact that despite individual conflicts, both sides keep the focus on a strategic goal. After all, they understand: any fragmentation or split in Europe – is a gain for the aggressor, and this cannot be allowed.

VI. Scenarios for the development of the Polish-Ukrainian partnership

The current dynamics of the Polish-Ukrainian partnership allows us to consider three scenarios of further development, depending on internal and external factors, for the next 5-10 years.

Scenario 1 "Advanced integration". In this scenario, events develop favourably for both parties. The war ends with the restoration of Ukraine's control over most of its territories, security guarantees are implemented, and the economy is actively recovering. Ukraine fulfills EU conditions at an accelerated pace, and by 2030 it will become a member of the European Union. Poland and Ukraine form a close union within the EU, like the Franco-German tandem, but in the eastern dimension. Joint production clusters are being created, for example, in the defense industry – joint ventures for the production of military equipment for EU armies, in the energy industry – consortia for the development of hydrogen technologies or nuclear energy. Bilateral trade volumes are increasing. The free movement of labor leads to the emergence of a single labor market in Poland and Ukraine, where Ukrainians fill the shortage of personnel in Poland, and Poles invest in Ukraine. Institutionally, partners coordinate positions in Brussels, creating common platforms for the promotion of regional interests. Such a scenario would mean a substantial strengthening of Europe's regional resilience: the eastern flank is becoming economically developed, secure and cohesive. At the same time, this version of the development of events is quite idealized.

Scenario 2 "Limited functional partnership". The process of Ukraine's accession is delayed, the war is in a protracted phase without a clear end. Ukraine continues to move towards the EU, but full membership is postponed, say, to the 2030s. Poland continues to support Ukraine, but a consensus is emerging within the EU itself in favour of gradually involving Ukraine in certain policies so far without formal membership. In this case, the Polish-Ukrainian partnership takes on the character of very close bilateral cooperation without deep institutional integration. Border barriers are maintained. Cooperation focuses on practical areas: defense (joint exercises, arms production under bilateral programs), energy, trade. This limited partnership still ensures a high level of stability: the Ukrainian economy closely cooperates with the Polish and European economies, military capacity is maintained, and sanctions pressure on Russia continues. However, a certain uncertainty remains: Ukraine seems to be almost part of the EU, but not yet. In general, it can be said that such a scenario preserves the status quo.

Scenario 3 "Fragmentation and rollback". The worst case scenario involves a gradual slowdown in the current positive dynamics due to a combination of external and internal factors. Changes in the political priorities of individual states, economic difficulties or increasing social fatigue from a long war can affect the level of support for Ukraine in the EU. At the same time, in the post-war period, Ukraine will face difficult tasks of rebuilding and protecting its own economy, which may give rise to new discussions about trade policy or market competition. Experience has shown that even between strategic partners, sensitive economic issues may also arise. If such situations are not resolved in a timely manner, they can create tension in bilateral relations. An additional risk factor may be internal challenges in the EU itself – economic recession, growing populist sentiment or difficult discussions about reforming the Union ahead of new enlargement. In this case, the process of Ukraine's integration may slow down. With unfavorable developments, the partnership between Poland and Ukraine would not have stopped, but could have moved to a more pragmatic and less ambitious format. Poland would focus on internal reforms and regional coordination, and Ukraine – on diversifying international cooperation and finding additional security and economic guarantees. In a wider European context, this would mean a weakening of strategic unity and a greater fragmentation of policy approaches towards Russia. Instead of a safety belt, a new fault would have formed in Eastern Europe. This is a risk that both Warsaw and Kyiv realize, and they are trying to prevent such a scenario.

An overview of further scenarios is useful for betting awareness. The most desirable, of course, is the first scenario that corresponds to the interests of Poland, Ukraine, and the entire EU. However, given the lack of significant progress in peace negotiations and the end of the war, such an option is currently unlikely. The second scenario preserves the status quo, is also acceptable, although less optimal. It is rather a transitional stage, but it is important not to get stuck in it for a long time. The third scenario – is something that should be avoided in every way, because it can mean the defeat not only of Ukraine, but also of the whole of Europe.

Conclusions

Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine became a catalyst for a deep transformation of European economic security. In this process, the Polish-Ukrainian partnership went beyond traditional bilateral cooperation and turned into a structural element of the new EU sustainability architecture. Poland has become a key logistics, energy and defense-industrial hub of Europe's eastern flank. Despite the war, Ukraine demonstrated its ability to quickly integrate into European supply chains, modernize the military industry and adapt the economy to the conditions of a long confrontation.

Thus, the partnership between Warsaw and Kyiv today – is a strategic investment in the long-term security of Europe. Not only the restoration of Ukraine depends on its success, but also the ability of the European Union to act as a geopolitical actor capable of protecting its own interests. The key question is whether Europe will be able to consolidate this transformation institutionally and strategically or will allow internal divisions to slow down the formation of a sustainable and cohesive security architecture on the eastern flank.

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Within EEYES Insight Lab, analytical research is conducted, while events—such as house concerts, open lectures, panel discussions, and forums—serve as a platform for exchanging ideas. A key focus is cultural representation in Berlin, where international debates and meetings with partners take place. The Instagram feed highlights current events, and work on grant applications ensures the sustainability of projects. Each direction includes internship opportunities, so participants gain not only knowledge but also practical experience.

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