

The Neighbor's Consent: What Ukraine's Accession Means for Poland

On May 22, 2022, Andrzej Duda, then Poland's president, became the first foreign head of state to address the Verkhovna Rada in person since the full-scale invasion. "I personally will not rest until Ukraine becomes a member of the European Union in the full sense of the word," he [told](#) the deputies. Four days into the invasion, he had co-signed, with seven other Central European presidents, [a call](#) to grant Ukraine candidate status immediately. Four years later, on July 1, 2026, Jarosław Kaczyński, leader of Law and Justice, whose party had held the presidency and the government in 2022, [wrote](#) to its members that Ukraine "cannot be admitted to the European Union unless it entirely abandons" the course of its politics of memory, and called on them to use every available means to block the government's efforts to integrate Ukraine "on privileged terms."

In April 2024, Radosław Sikorski, foreign minister of the government that had replaced Kaczyński's, set out the logic of 2022 in his [exposé](#) to the Sejm: Poland could "move the borders of the free world

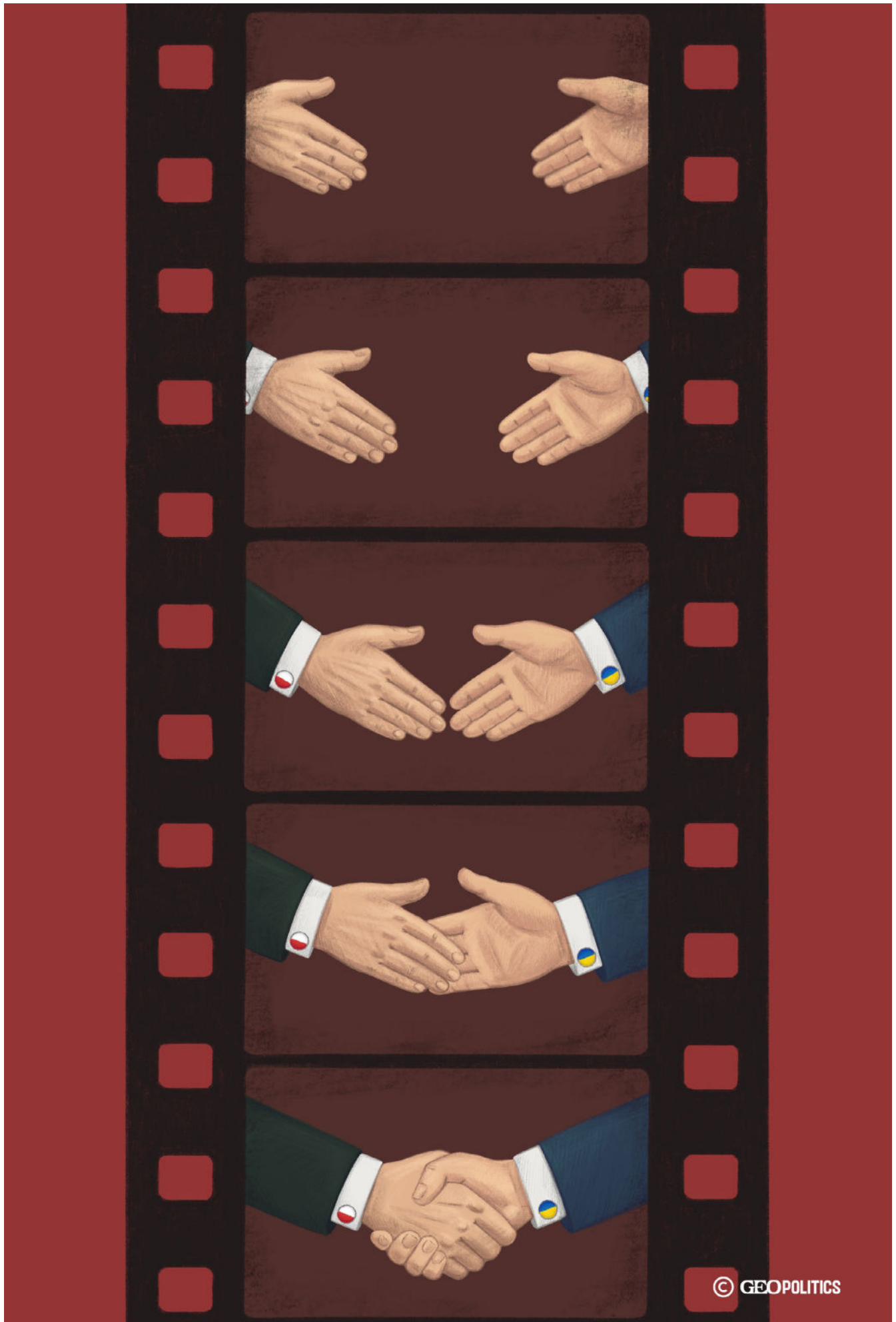
hundreds of kilometers to the east," and even as a net contributor to the Union's budget it would gain from membership more than it lost. In September 2026 the same minister [said](#) in Kyiv that Poland blocks no negotiating cluster, but that Ukraine must expect compromises on agriculture and transport and be careful in choosing its national heroes. The foreign policy strategy of March 2026 and the MFA position of July [codified](#) this: "the decisions taken must secure Poland's key interests"; no accelerated, partial, or "reverse" membership; transition periods for agriculture and transport; Poland's interests defended "[like Hungary](#)." Polish society has moved with its politicians: support for Ukraine's membership fell from [87 percent](#) in March 2022 to [43 percent](#) in June 2026.

Between these statements lies a change that runs through both political camps, with different intensity. The state that drove Ukraine's admission to Western institutions now attaches conditions beyond the accession criteria, slows the process, and measures Ukraine's membership by the particular interests it may affect.



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The change occurred during wartime and has three sources: the electoral rise and ideology of the Polish right, ambiguous American policy on the war, and bilateral disputes that Warsaw now pursues through the accession talks. Its consequences reach beyond the two countries.

What Changed Poland's Position on Ukraine's European Integration

The first source lies inside Polish politics. Law and Justice held power from 2015 to 2023 and lost it despite winning 35 percent of the vote, but the far right that entered the Sejm in 2019 with 7 percent, and won the same share in 2023, is no longer a fringe: in the first round of the presidential election of 2025 Konfederacja's candidate Sławomir Mentzen and Grzegorz Braun of its breakaway Confederation of the Polish Crown won [21 percent](#) between them, and the presidency went to Karol Nawrocki, the candidate of the right. In an [October 2026 CBOS poll](#), the right holds nearly two-fifths of the vote and the far right a fifth. Polish politics is contested between the liberal center and a right that sets the agenda on migration, agriculture, and Ukraine, and whose ideology runs in two directions that contradict each other.

One is Polish security leadership in the region, which requires Ukraine as a partner inside the Western institutions. On April 5, 2023, receiving Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Warsaw, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki [said](#) that “the place of the heroic Ukrainian nation is in NATO, is in the European Union.” The other is everything else the right stands for — nationalism, protectionism, resistance to Brussels and Berlin, opposition to migration and fear for Polish identity — in which Ukraine is an adversary in history and a competitor in the economy, and Ukrainians in Poland a burden on the state. This reading coexisted uneasily with the first and, since April 2023, has gradually overtaken it. Ten days after Zelenskyy's visit, Kaczyński announced a [ban](#) on imports of Ukrainian grain and dozens of

other products. “There is no Poland without the countryside,” he [told](#) the farmers that autumn, and his agriculture minister [explained](#) that since “on the present terms, Polish agriculture will never win against Ukrainian agriculture,” the ban was a precondition for Ukrainian membership. In August 2025, Nawrocki [vetoed](#) the law extending the refugees' legal stay, because “Polish citizens are treated worse in their own state than guests from Ukraine.”

The same ideology treats the Union, and Germany as its embodiment, as a threat to what is Polish, and has made opposition to qualified-majority voting — the question that decides whether a large enlargement is possible at all — a cause. While the European Parliament [was debating its proposal for](#) qualified majority voting on “interim steps in the enlargement process,” Morawiecki [warned](#) that the Parliament's proposals would “lead to the liquidation of nation states”; Kaczyński [calls](#) the Tusk government “an occupying power” serving Germany, and in July 2026 described its Ukraine policy as “one-sided submission to the interests... of our eastern neighbor, dictated to Tusk from Berlin.” At the Volhynia memorial in Chełm that same month, Kaczyński [said](#) Ukraine “cannot enter the European Union... with Banderism, and we will do everything so that it does not enter, if it does not withdraw from all of this.”

The Polish government has adjusted to a consensus that the right has moved. Through three election campaigns in a row — 2023, 2025, 2027 — the pressure of the right has shifted opinion on the questions that count: for instance, support for accepting Ukrainian refugees fell from 94 percent in early 2022 to [48 percent](#) in December 2025, and [60 percent](#) approved Nawrocki's veto. The government thus refuses to implement the [migration pact](#) in full and carries the farmers' interest inside its coalition: when the Sejm speaker, from the Left, promised Kyiv membership “as soon as possible,” the deputy speaker from the Polish People's Party [countered](#) that “it would be the death of Polish agriculture.” Nevertheless, this adjustment to the rise of the right does not explain

the whole turn; the rest lies in security and American policy.

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The second source is the ambiguous American policy on the war, which has taken different forms under the two presidents. The Biden administration sustained Ukraine's defense, but it managed escalation rather than sought Russia's defeat: it delayed tanks, ATACMS missiles, and F-16s and only gradually lifted restrictions on striking Russian territory. As Democratic congressman Jim Himes [observed](#), "we have just about always been too late." Indeed, Republicans close to Trump [blocked](#) its aid request in Congress for half a year. The Trump administration has moved to press Kyiv rather than Moscow.

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Washington's weight in Warsaw is of a different order from Brussels'. About 10,000 American troops are stationed in Poland, and the right has turned its pro-American line into a pro-Trump one: Trump [endorsed](#) Nawrocki during the 2025 campaign, and in May 2026 he [announced](#) 5,000 additional troops "based on the successful election of Karol Nawrocki," while withdrawing 5,000 from Germany. The government could not ignore this, and on Ukraine, Warsaw has adjusted its interest to the outcome Washington would accept. Tusk asks no one "to love Ukraine," only to [see](#) that "it is in Poland's interest that Ukraine does not lose this war."

The result is an ambivalence Warsaw has to live with. It repeats that Ukraine cannot lose and lends this position important political support, secures the hub at Jasionka through which [almost all Western aid](#) passes, and keeps calling on others to support it. At the Warsaw Security Forum this October, Tusk [made](#) supporting Ukraine the duty

of anyone who has Poland's sovereignty in mind. Meanwhile, American policy, on which Polish support has depended, has shifted since November 2025 to accommodate many of Russia's demands at the expense of European security. The 28-point plan closed NATO to Ukraine and instead [declared](#) it "eligible for EU membership," and the December 2025 draft [set](#) accession for January 2027. Poland had no part in writing those terms; Sikorski's September demand for a seat at the peace talks came because it had none. Yet even so, the objection Warsaw raised to the American settlement concerned Ukraine's accelerated membership: the president's office answered from Washington that Nawrocki [unequivocally opposed](#) such a path within a peace agreement.

Kyiv had expected Warsaw's help in accelerating its accession, as in 2022, and the December 2023 change of government seemed to make this more likely. Instead, it received a firm position that acceleration was impossible and, on top of conditions on agricultural exports and truckers' rights, a condition on history policy.

The third source is bilateral. Kyiv had expected Warsaw's help in accelerating its accession, as in 2022, and the December 2023 change of government seemed to make this more likely. Instead, it received a firm position that acceleration was impossible and, on top of conditions on agricultural exports and truckers' rights, a condition on history policy. Poland's consent to Ukraine's membership was made dependent on Kyiv's acceptance of the Polish interpretation of the Volhynia massacres — the killing of tens of thousands of Polish civilians in 1943–44, recognized by the Polish parliament as genocide and treated by Ukraine as a Polish–Ukrainian conflict with victims on both sides. This historical condition, too, was added under the same pressure of the right and of public opinion. Membership is no longer a strategic priority but, in [Kosiniak-Kamysz's definition](#),

a matter of the state's development. Polish interests can thus turn into conditions, since the dependence is asymmetric: Ukraine badly needs Poland's consent, while Poland does not treat Ukraine's membership as a need of its own and demands that these interests be secured first.

What Poland and the Region Lose

As Ukraine has long been the central country for Polish leadership in EU enlargement policy, Warsaw can no longer play that role after the strategy shift. Other candidates have champions of their own: Moldova is helped by Romania, whose president [proposed](#) in September 2025 to begin “technical negotiations” with Chişinău “even if the negotiations are not officially launched” — and Warsaw itself has hinted that Moldova's path could be separated from Ukraine's. When Hungary's veto raised the question of decoupling the two candidates, which Kyiv [opposed](#), Poland's deputy minister for European affairs [said](#) that “when the time comes, we're open to having this discussion.” Georgia has no champion, as its government has halted its European integration process, and the Commission [calls](#) Georgia “a candidate country in name only.” The Polish Council presidency of 2025 [promised](#) “the pace and quality” of enlargement east and south, but in the end opened nothing in the east. Instead, Warsaw only offered to “revive” the Eastern Partnership — a format of 2009 for neighbors without a membership perspective. That is a step back from enlargement, not a policy for enlargement.

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Another problem concerns the reform of the Union's decision-making, which is essential for the next round

of enlargement. In 2024, Sikorski [told the Sejm](#) that a Union of more than thirty members would have to decide more efficiently, and that Poland might have to choose between treaty reform and “closing the road to membership to its eastern and southern neighbors” — a bold statement for a politician from a country that cherishes its veto, though he would keep unanimity for enlargement itself.

The link between winning the war, successful enlargement and a stronger geopolitical Europe is the ground on which the Union revived the enlargement process in 2022, and Poland's turn weakens it at its most sensitive point. Advocacy for Ukraine has shifted to the Baltic and Nordic states, none with Poland's weight in the Council, and the conditions have multiplied rather than fallen away. This leaves the Union without an instrument of its own security on its eastern border just as Washington withdraws from it.

Restoring the Strategic Case

Restoring Polish leadership and ensuring the success of the enlargement policy for Eastern European candidate countries would require three developments.

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First is the insulation of the accession process from domestic political pressure, which the Polish government can best achieve in cooperation with Brussels. On October 6 the Commission [proposed](#) that negotiating clusters be opened by qualified majority; that new members be bound for fifteen years by a safeguard clause under which their voting rights can be suspended and their ability to block further enlargements, or to pursue bilateral disputes through them, limited; and that accession treaties carry sectoral safeguards — for Ukraine, explicitly, on farm payments and on market access for sensitive agricultural

products. This proposal grants the agricultural protection Poland demanded and [relieves](#) the government of a veto it is under domestic pressure to use: once clusters are opened by majority, decisions on Ukraine's accession cease to be an instrument of electoral competition in Warsaw, whoever governs there after 2027. On October 13, after Hungary lifted its veto, the Union [opened clusters 2 and 3](#), and Kyiv hopes to open the last two, which include agriculture, by the end of the year — under the existing rule of unanimity, while the Commission's proposals are [examined in the Council](#).

The second concerns Poland's conception of its own security, which the president and the right continue to locate outside the Union: this month Nawrocki [told](#) Rzeczpospolita that “the more American soldiers in Poland, the better,” called Tusk “[an anti-American prime minister](#)” and blamed the defense ministry for stalling talks on a permanent American base. Sikorski, for his part, asked “[our MAGA president](#)” to use his friendship with Trump to secure that base and to explain to him “that Putin is the aggressor.” Washington's pursuit of an accommodation with Russia, including the “[Europe–Russia postwar security framework](#)” its envoys raised in Miami on October 9, undermines the very premise of this reliance: that NATO and American forces stationed on Polish territory deter Russia. Nor would a future administration more firmly committed to an American presence alter the trajectory: successive administrations, whatever their disposition towards Europe, have insisted that the Europeans assume a greater share of responsibility for transatlantic

security. Irrespective of the scale of that presence and of the choices of subsequent governments, Poland has every reason to invest more resolutely in European, and not merely national, defense, and to restore both the security rationale of enlargement and its own leadership within it. The American policy of October 2026 ought in itself to provide a decisive impetus in that direction.

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The third step falls to Kyiv, which cannot rely on the strategic weight of Ukraine's victory to outweigh the attention the bilateral relationship requires. The [lifting](#), in November 2024, of the moratorium on exhumations imposed in 2017 was a necessary step but did not settle the historical question: in 2026, a dispute over Ukraine's domestic memory politics crossed into foreign policy and produced the deepest crisis in Polish–Ukrainian relations in years. What is needed is deeper and sustained cooperation on history, on trade and transport, and on the integration of Ukrainian refugees in Poland and their reintegration on return, as well as a public diplomacy that addresses a Polish public opinion now turned against Ukraine's membership. Finally, more structured cooperation on Ukraine's European integration could also be helpful not only to Ukraine, but also to Polish leadership and position in the EU ■