

# Poland has taken on an unprecedented leadership role over the EU's foreign policy during the Ukraine crisis

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*The EU formally adopted new sanctions against Russia on 8 September which will come into force over the next few days. [Elizabeth Radziszewski](#) assesses the role of Poland during the Ukraine crisis and how the country's foreign policy sits with the EU's response to Russia. She writes that Poland has taken on an unprecedented leadership role during the crisis, which could be enhanced by the appointment of Poland's Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, as the next President of the European Council.*



When the Euromaidan protests began after Ukraine's government rejected the signing of an EU trade pact, member states of the EU expressed sympathy toward the crowds. When Russia began supporting the rebels in the eastern part of Ukraine in subsequent months, EU members condemned the move. Overall, up until the imposition of recent sanctions, the EU's tangible response to the tragic events in Ukraine has been sclerotic and ambivalent.

Yet in the midst of the crisis, Poland, the EU's sixth largest member, embraced what has seemed like an unprecedented leadership role. Radosław Sikorski, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, worked with Germany and France to negotiate the resolution of the crisis between the protesters and Yanukovych that paved the way for new presidential elections in Ukraine. Poland has also courted the United States in hopes of seeing NATO troops on its soil in light of Russia's aggressive policies. What explains this wave of activism and how does it fit into Poland's grand policy designs?

## Ukraine in the context of Polish foreign policy

Poland's support of Ukraine's sovereignty and its closer union with the West, while notable, is not merely a reflection of the country's solidarity with a fellow democracy with which it also happens to share historical ties, albeit often painful ones. Poland has done this before. During the 2008 conflict between Russia and Georgia, the Polish government spoke in defence of Georgia's sovereignty. It was also a strong supporter of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

But Poland's foreign policy, oriented towards securing a more prominent role in European affairs while also keeping close ties to the United States, is driven first and foremost by over-arching security concerns with economic goals following close behind. Poland's interests in bringing Ukraine closer to Europe and in defending its territorial integrity are part of a consistent strategy of survival for a country whose sovereignty has been up for grabs in the game of big power politics. Enduring partitions, German occupation during WWII and years of communist rule imposed on the country by the Soviet Union, has taught Poland that sovereignty is not a guarantee. On the contrary, it can be traded and moulded to the interests of the big and the strong.

The 'loss' of Ukraine due to the resurgence of Russia presents a paramount security issue for Poland. Poland's activism during the Euromaiden protests, its vehement support of sanctions against Russia, and vocal response, have served as strategies to strengthen the country's security position in two ways. First, by getting involved in negotiations to end the first crisis and now pushing for a tougher stand against Russia, Poland has been working to convince Europe and the U.S. of the seriousness of Russia's threat to the stability of East-Central Europe and the need to offset that threat. Second, its pro-Ukraine activism has served not only to rally support toward Ukraine but also to highlight Poland's leadership in East-Central Europe, therefore significantly raising the country's profile in Europe and beyond.

These strategies effectively move Poland beyond the periphery, making it a player whose voice may actually count for something. The effective use of such soft-power strategies has already brought some dividends as is evident in two notable developments. First has been the recent selection of Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as the president of the European Council. This role enables Tusk to help set the agenda on future approaches to the Ukrainian crisis, mainly pushing for greater solidarity with Ukraine in the wake of Russia's aggression while concurrently cementing Poland's significance as regional leader. Second, the potential expansion of NATO's base in Poland, driven in some part by Polish activism in the region, could signal a strong deterrent against resurgent Russia's future decisions about meddling in the country's affairs.



Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, Credit: Antonis Samaras (CC-BY-SA-3.0)

The importance of security in Poland's foreign policy is hardly new. Poland's post-communist foreign policy has always been about ensuring that the painful history and the curse of geography that placed it between two superpowers would not endanger the country's independence. Its EU accession, controversial support of the United States in the war in Iraq and the now defunct agreement to have the missile defence shield placed on its soil exemplify the country's wide-ranging and diverse strategies toward fulfilling its security goal. Instead of succumbing to the realities of not being a major power and accepting its unfortunate geographic location, Poland has found a way to be proactive about pursuing its interests. The government's activism during the crisis has enabled the country to emerge as a regional leader, a connector between the West and the East in a way that would make it a respectable and significant player. And in the end, it is that significance which garners attention and the ultimate prize of stronger security guarantees.

Poland's activism during the crisis could, in the long term, also benefit the country economically, but the benefits pale in light of security concerns. Poland's largest trading partner is Germany and over 70 per cent of its trade is done with EU countries. The potential to gain economically from a stable, democratic Ukraine exists. With a population of nearly 46 million people and its geographic proximity to Poland, Ukraine could become a large market for Polish exports. Long-term economic gains are likely now that Ukraine has finally signed the EU Association Agreement that sparked the initial crisis. Still, without stability, Ukraine might focus more on dealing with pro-Russian rebels in the east rather than demonstrating firm commitment toward meeting the terms of the agreement. In other words, while Poland could gain economically from a peaceful resolution of the crisis, the benefits are long-term at best.

In the end, Poland's leadership during the crisis reflects its long-term strategic interests. While some may see the country's actions as surprising and unexpected, Poland's vocal defence of Ukraine's territorial integrity is not merely reactionary but rather consistent with the over-arching goals of maintaining security that has been violated so often throughout history. Today, Poland no longer has to worry about Germany. Conflict between the two is unthinkable as both are members of the European Union and NATO. Therefore all eyes are on Russia, the resurgent power, the country's historical rival and the only serious threat. Thus, Poland will most likely continue to do what it has done skillfully in the past: actively lobby the Europeans and the United States for the relevance, and thus security, of East-Central Europe.

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor*

of the London School of Economics.

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