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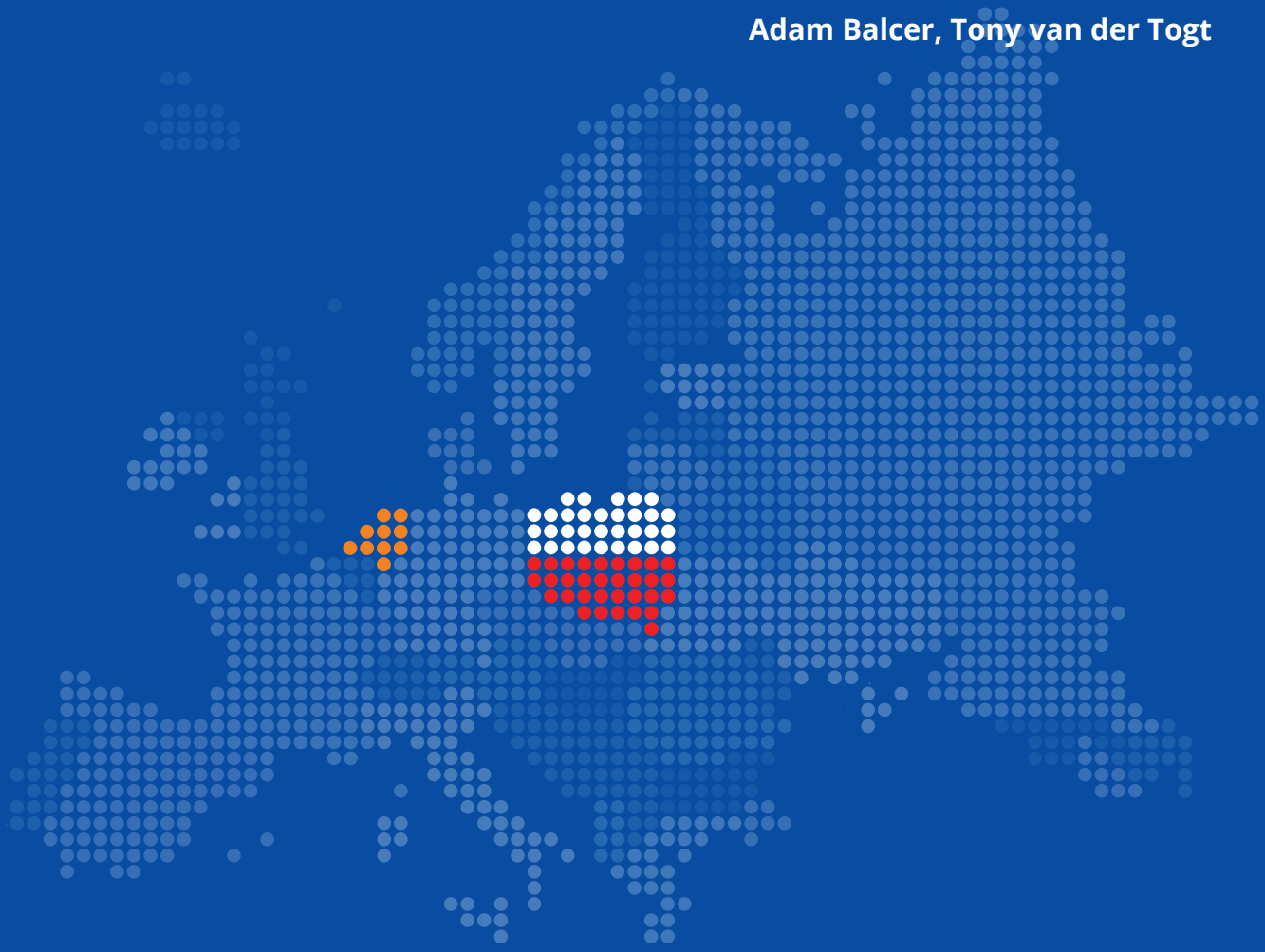

We shall maintain:
the Netherlands and Poland facing European and Transatlantic challenges together

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I. Introduction

Relations between the Netherlands and Poland are deep and historical, marked by regular periods of intensive cooperation on all levels: political, economic, societal, military, and cultural. The positions of both countries in the EU and NATO on key issues now coincide even more often than before, enabling them to face current challenges together and in close cooperation, both bilaterally and in multilateral formats.

Today an intensification of cooperation between The Hague and Warsaw is needed more than ever, due to Russia's military and hybrid aggression against the entire European security order and the challenges posed by the new US administration, which pursues a more "transactional" approach with very different views on Transatlantic cooperation compared to previous administrations. In the current situation, such cooperation is especially significant for topics pertaining to the partners in the Eastern Neighbourhood and the Western Balkans (WB).

In this context, the Polish EU presidency in the first half of 2025 provides a unique opportunity to enhance the collaboration between both countries by focusing on some of its main priorities: European security, enlargement and the Eastern Partnership (EaP). Furthermore, the Netherlands will be hosting the NATO Summit 2025 at the end of June, when all the relevant interconnected issues will also be on the table and Polish-Dutch cooperation could also play an important role.

In order to intensify Dutch-Polish cooperation, the Polish College of Eastern Europe (KEW) and the Netherlands Clingendael Institute with financial support of the Netherlands Embassy in Warsaw organized the first of General Maczek Dialogues with a Dutch-Polish expert roundtable on European security and EU-enlargement in November 2024 in Wojnowice (Poland). This joint paper builds on discussions conducted during this conference. The General Maczek Dialogues are intended to be held regularly and on a rotating basis in both countries. A second expert conference will build on the results of the first and will be held during the Polish EU-presidency in April 2025 in The Hague.

II. Key points

- The Russian war against Ukraine has put European security and possible further EU enlargement as two often interrelated key issue areas – much higher on the European and Transatlantic agenda's. In this context, Poland and the Netherlands are closely working together within the EU and NATO particularly with regard to security issues and support to Ukraine to counter Russian aggression. The positions of the Netherlands and Poland are more closely aligned than in the past, also on the importance of relations with Eastern European and Western Balkans partners, especially candidate states,. Intensifying close cooperation between the Netherlands and Poland, both bilaterally and within EU and NATO, could contribute to new initiatives and ideas to further develop the effectiveness of the EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), its Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and strengthen Transatlantic security at the same time.

- The European security order is currently threatened by Russia's military aggression against Ukraine and its hybrid war against the EU and the West as a whole. Whereas the immediate focus is on assisting Ukraine to support its war effort and bring the war to a just and sustainable peace, the EU also has to deal with the need to substantially rebuild its own defences and capabilities to defend the sovereignty of its member states and protect its neighbours and partners. In this context, a more "transactional" US Administration with a very different view on alliances, has led to an increase of uncertainties at a time when the future of a rules-based world order is at stake. Therefore, especially today the Netherlands and Poland should try together to bridge the divide concerning threat perceptions across the EU, leading to a more effective response to Russia's war against Ukraine

- EU enlargement has been experiencing an exceptional momentum since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. It has gained a more strategic, geopolitical and security-oriented dimension. However, the EU has also been facing continued challenges on rule of law issues and democratic backsliding, not only in candidate countries, but also internally within individual EU member states. The Netherlands and Poland should work closely together on rule of law issues as another main priority of the Polish EU presidency, while making good use of Poland's own recent experience in struggling with such issues. In this context, the EU could assist candidate countries in more effectively dealing with such challenges.

- Decision making within the EU is often cumbersome and overly reactive, making it difficult for the EU to always act in unity, even when facing unprecedented challenges, Diverging interests between member states and different threat perceptions are preventing more assertive and pro-active policies by the EU in dealing with such challenges. The intensification of cooperation between the Netherlands and Poland should support the EU in becoming a more effective geopolitical actor and they should work closely together in coalitions of the willing, if and when common EU-positions cannot be established.

III. European security

The European security order has been seriously violated by the Russian aggression against Ukraine, which has been ongoing since 2014 and a continuing hybrid war against European states, including against partners in the Eastern Partnership. The original strategic partnership between the EU and Russia had already been abandoned after the annexation of Crimea and the Kremlin's aggression in Eastern Ukraine in 2014. Although Moscow has attempted to reach out bilaterally to bigger EU-member states, like Germany and France, also Berlin and Paris have concluded that the war has led to fundamental changes and that countering Russia's aggression and finding a just and sustainable solution to the war is now more important than a normalization of relations and re-establishing financial and economic ties to the current regime. Moreover, most European countries have been labelled "unfriendly states" by Moscow after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine (2022) as a result of their continued support to Kyiv, including through the European Peace Facility to provide military aid. EU-Russia relations as such seemed to have reached a dead end.

In the meantime, individual European countries are also still confronted by Russia's broader hybrid conflict with the West, including its efforts to undermine support for Ukraine by sowing discord in their societies, undermining elections and threatening critical infrastructure. So far, European unity has been relatively stable and has already resulted in sixteen sanctions packages, seriously undermining Russian economic prospects in the mid-term and its capabilities to continue the war without end. However, the maintenance of this support in the medium term may be hampered by the further rise of war fatigue in the EU.

Already at the end of 2021 it has become clear that Moscow was only interested in discussing the European security order with the US and NATO, when it presented two draft treaties as an ultimatum to prevent its own invasion of Ukraine. The NATO-Russia Founding Act and the related NATO-Russia Council could not live up to any remaining expectations, as Moscow returned to the old Cold War policy of treating the US as the main enemy and European partners as simple vassals of

Washington. In this context, the only possible policy for NATO was a return to deterrence and containment and for member states to provide substantive support, both militarily and financially, to Kyiv to halt Russian aggression and ensure that Ukraine would be able to negotiate from a position of strength, if and when negotiations to end the war would become feasible.

At the same time, the US and Germany, in particular tried their utmost to prevent further escalation and a widening of the conflict into a direct war between Russia and NATO, partly preventing more decisive actions in support of Ukraine out of fear for crossing perceived Russian red lines. As it became clear that only NATO or the US bilaterally could provide real security guarantees, also EU (non-NATO) member states Finland and Sweden decided to opt for NATO membership. The security article 42.7 of the EU Treaty was deemed to be insufficient, also by lacking serious means to counter and/or deter Russian aggression against member states. And finally, it was de facto NATO that through the Ukraine Defence Contact Group took over the coordination of providing military aid to Ukraine.

As the war has already reached its third year, it is clear that Russia is still aiming for a long-term victory and looks unwilling to compromise on its original war aims of “demilitarization” and “denazification” of Ukraine, although the exact meaning of those terms remains unclear. There is still hope in Moscow that ultimately Western support for Ukraine will fail and that Europe and the US can be convinced that a “compromise” on Russian terms would be the best way forward.

The re-election of president Trump in November 2024 increased Russian hopes for a possible solution on Moscow’s terms, as he is considered to be more transactional and less willing to support partners in multilateral organizations, like NATO (“America first”). Europe is not the first geopolitical priority for the US, as China is seen as a bigger rival than Russia. In this context, the EU and Ukraine should be aware of the possibility of a deal between the US and Russia without involvement of either Brussels or Kyiv. Such a deal could be perceived as only rewarding aggression and would have a serious impact on the credibility of NATO’s collective security guarantees and hence deterrence. In the longer term this could easily lead to new military actions by Moscow against Ukraine, Moldova or EU member states, like the Baltic states and Poland. If US priorities would indeed shift even further to Indo-Pacific and China in particular, the EU would run a serious risk of being abandoned and unable in the current conditions to ensure its own security or that of its partners in Europe without US support. Therefore, the EU should prioritize strengthening European defence and stimulating closer defence cooperation with other European (non-EU) partners, like the United Kingdom, Turkey and Norway.

However, at the same time China is tacitly (and sometimes even openly) supporting Russia in the context of its "partnership without limits" which may mitigate the US eagerness to withdraw from Europe. Although Beijing has to take into account the possible risk of US secondary sanctions against its companies with serious financial interests in the US, Russia's partners Iran and North Korea do not face similar restrictions, already being under heavy international sanctions. Therefore, also this dimension will figure highly on the agenda of the NATO summit in The Hague.

1. The Netherlands, Poland and European Security

Relations between Poland and the Netherlands are based on a longstanding cooperation and understanding regarding the security in Europe and Transatlantic partnership that can be described as pro-NATO and US-oriented. Moreover, there is a very high level of overlapping interests and policies between Poland and the Netherlands concerning the above mentioned key issues (the war in Ukraine, Russia as the main threat, China as a challenge, European defence as complementary to NATO). This synergy of threat perceptions and positions enjoys a widespread societal support. For instance, in the most recent Standard Eurobarometer, more than 80% of Dutch and Polish respondents endorsed the EU's military supplies to Ukraine.

Whereas Poland has retained a more in-depth knowledge of Eastern Europe (including Russia), based on centuries of first-hand experience, this would be an excellent area for closer cooperation, as the Netherlands has only recently started to rebuild its knowledge base on this particular part of Europe. Other areas for closer cooperation could be in cyber security based on Polish initiatives or in decreasing dependence on external energy sources, where the Netherlands is a leader in renewable energy and sustainable technologies Furthermore, the Netherlands and Poland have always promoted close cooperation with the US on European security, which makes them credible supporters of a continuation of Transatlantic ties in a situation in which the current US Administration is reviewing its policies towards Europe.

In the current situation, there would also be ample opportunities for closer intra-European defence cooperation between Poland and the Netherlands, building on past experience of working together in joint projects (like on military mobility) and joint military exercises. The bilateral MoU between the respective ministries of Defence which is currently being prepared, should be signed as soon as possible to form the basis for this more intensive cooperation, especially concerning Ukraine and NATO's Eastern flank (where the Netherlands already contributes to NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence in Lithuania). Poland and the Netherlands could

also explore options for closer cooperation in air defence, building on the German European Sky Shield Initiative.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine triggered a radical increase of Poland's defence spending (from 2.2% of GDP in 2022 to 4.7% in the budget for 2025). As a consequence, Poland's military expenditure became in relation to the GDP the biggest one in NATO and one of the largest in absolute numbers. The Netherlands has also increased considerably its defence budget since 2022 surpassing 2% of the GDP, but much more modestly than Poland. The further deepening of security cooperation between Warsaw and The Hague will develop more rapidly if the Netherlands could continue the rise of its military spending and if the countries could work together in increasing the EU's defence budget as well. Finally, both Poland and the Netherlands are in a position to be taken seriously by the current US Administration, because of their substantive support to Ukraine and their increasing defence budgets and even more if The Netherlands would succeed in reaching its NATO capability targets and rising its military expenditure up to at least 3%. In this way, both countries are clearly showing that they are contributing more to European defence and defence of their partners Ukraine and Moldova and leading the way for other European states to follow suit.

2. Strengthening EU-NATO relations during the second Trump Administration

Strengthening EU-NATO relations could be used in an effort to convince the US that a deal on Russian terms would not be in the interest of the US either and would only lead to renewed aggression by Russia against other European states or stimulate others (like China) to follow the Russian example. Deterring and containing Russia now is ultimately cheaper (also to US taxpayers) than dealing with further aggression later and indirectly it counterbalances China, Russia's senior partner.

Certainly, Ukraine and Europe should have a role in any negotiated solution to the war. However, Europe will have to step up to the challenge and increase defence budgets substantially above the 2% as agreed in 2016 (as Trump is already demanding raising budgets to 5%). Trump's transactional policies could also imply that investing in European defence industry will have to go hand in hand with simultaneously still buying substantive amounts of American-made arms and ammunition. Also arming Ukraine could come at the cost of European taxpayers with European states providing the financing for continued US military support to Ukraine. The European defence plans, as currently developed under a new Defence Commissioner will have to form the basis for strengthening European defence, stimulating private business to invest more in European defence industry (including possibly

on Ukrainian territory), but also either using the EU budget or finding creative extra-budgetary solutions to finance European defence. Especially for the Netherlands, this could prove problematic, as The Hague has always been a fierce opponent of EU loans.

As indicated above, both the Netherlands and Poland are in a good position to have a constructive dialogue with Washington on the EU-NATO cooperation and within the NATO (Europe-America). Moreover, the strengthening of EU-NATO co-operation and a strong European pillar within NATO would show also to Russia and China that Europe is taking its own security and that of its partners much more seriously. Bilateral security arrangements with Ukraine and Moldova could complement such efforts. Both Poland and the Netherlands have been signing agreements to that effect.

Plans for a European Defence Union most probably will be soon put at the top of the EU agenda. Poland and the Netherlands believe that they should be discussed with other non-EU NATO partners, like the UK, Norway, Canada and Turkey. Indeed, both Poland and the Netherlands are currently investing in closer defence cooperation with the UK, the Nordic and Baltic states, which could be further institutionalized in the nearest future. And after the German elections (February 2025) both countries could strive for a stronger European defence with Berlin as well, building on already existing close cooperation, especially between the Dutch, Polish and German armed forces (also within NATO's Enhanced Forward Presence).

Finally, not only would Europe have to take a bigger share of the burden in providing for its own security and that of its Eastern neighbours (especially Ukraine and Moldova) , it could be put under pressure to support the US in its more global agenda as well (including within NATO). This could also have a profound effect on the EU's currently more balanced relations with China, which could become more confrontational under US pressure. This might be less problematic for Poland than for the Netherlands, which has been less willing to give in to such US pressure to limit especially high-tech exports to China and restrict Chinese companies investing in critical infrastructure.

3. Strengthening unity inside the EU

Although the EU has been able to find agreement on sixteen sanctions packages so far, strict implementation remains a problem, as member states are responsible for its implementation and some of the member states have asked for numerous exemptions, based on their own dependence on Russian energy. Given

the fact that Hungary and gradually also Slovakia are developing their own political and energy relations with Moscow challenges coherent EU policies towards Russia and is making agreement on further sanctions packages more difficult. If other EU member states would also include populist, radical and pro-Moscow parties in government, EU unity will be further eroded, putting financial and military support to Ukraine at risk.

A possible political solution could be found in further developing the concept of *ad hoc* coalitions, like the Nordic-Baltic states, the Joint Expeditionary Force (including the United Kingdom) or having a revamped Weimar Triangle, if and when the situation in Germany after the elections and France would allow this. Poland and the Netherlands could take an active role in building such coalitions in several areas relating to security and defence, especially as both countries have already played a leading role in providing Ukraine with military equipment (F16's, air defence, tanks, self-propelled tracked howitzers and ammunition). Both countries should strive for an active membership in such coalitions and support each other for being both included. Such coalitions could also play a role, if a temporary ceasefire would be agreed in Ukraine and some form of peacekeeping operation would be called for. The recent US outreach to Putin and the Trump Administration's increasing pressure on Ukraine to accept a US-brokered "peace deal" have already given a new impetus to broader European discussions, forcing European NATO-partners to offer their own possible solutions for ending the war and strengthening European security. Both the Netherlands and Poland should consider, how best to contribute to such plans as now being developed by the UK and France in particular.

More discussions and exchanges between populations from on the one hand western and southern EU member states and on the other hand central and eastern EU member states could assist in bridging the gap between different threat perceptions on the war in Ukraine and stimulate a more coherent European approach and strategy. Poland and the Netherlands as representatives of eastern and western members, respectively should stimulate and moderate these debates by engaging other member states from the north and the south, with which they have closer relations.

To the extent possible, the EU could stimulate member states to develop a "whole of society" approach and learn from the experience of Sweden and Finland in terms of preparing for civil defence and societal resilience. Poland and the Netherlands could stimulate such discussions within the EU and organise meetings in a trilateral or quadrilateral format (Poland, Netherlands and/or Finland and Sweden) to explore which useful lessons (know-how, best practices, "train and equip")

can be learned from this experience. Such experience could also serve as input for the EU discussions on a European Democracy Shield, which will take place under the Danish Presidency in the second half of 2025.

Finally, it would be very important to deal more effectively with hybrid challenges, like undermining elections in EU member states or EU Eastern and Balkan partners and strengthening resilience across the EU in the broadest sense, including in support of the rule of law and in more effectively countering corruption. In this area, the EU not only faces challenges by Russia and China, but also from the new political role of Elon Musk in the US. Poland and the Netherlands should work together within the EU to protect European sovereignty and cooperate closely with especially Ukraine and Moldova to strengthen their resilience against external interference.

4. Dealing with the war in Ukraine (and Russia)

EU relations with Ukraine and support for Kyiv in its efforts to counter Russian aggression and preserve itself as an independent and sovereign state has become in recent years much more important for the EU as a whole than building a strategic and economically complementary relationship with Russia. The EU has stepped up its financial and gradually also military support to the Ukrainian state and is prepared to assist Ukraine in reconstruction and a simultaneous reforms process to make the country ready to eventually become a EU member. In the meantime, closer cooperation, also in security matters with the EU and individual member states also aims at bringing Ukraine's EU membership closer. Such cooperation is no one way street, as in a number of areas (active defence, counter-hybrid and war fighting) EU and NATO members can learn a lot from Ukraine's experience in the actual conflict.

The Netherlands and Poland should continue their present level of support to Ukraine and should work together within EU and NATO to increase European support, both financially, military and economically. Both countries could play an active role in reconstruction efforts, including within multilateral formats and organisations. It could build on their respective programmes of assistance already in place and strive for a solution to any (bilateral) issues hindering closer cooperation with Ukraine. Furthermore, the Netherlands and Poland could stimulate discussions within the EU on a more strategic approach towards Ukraine and Eastern Europe at large, not only for a post-war situation, but also on how the bring the war to an acceptable end. Such discussions should lead to a comprehensive EU strategy on Eastern Europe, including on how to deal with Russia.

Russia poses a fundamental security threat to Europe with continued aggression and violations of international law, not only in Ukraine, but also in its hybrid

efforts in the cyber sphere, by actions like GPS-jamming, airspace violations, incendiary incidents and sabotage against vital infrastructure at sea. This is a common challenge for NATO and EU with each organization having its own toolbox to address parts of the challenges. Closer cooperation between EU and NATO is therefore most needed. For the foreseeable future (and at least till a a sustainable ceasefire can be reached in Ukraine), only containment and deterrence will define the West's relationship with Russia.

Furthermore, European economies are increasingly decoupling from the Russian economy and are decreasing decisively their dependence on Russian energy sources. Even if the war would stop tomorrow, a return to business as usual is not to be expected. Russia would be held accountable for its aggression and would have to pay for war damages in Ukraine, including by the use of Russian financial assets abroad. Also the quasi-nationalization of western companies in Russia (taken over by the Russian state or forced sales at lower prices than their real market value to Russian nationals) would have to be addressed. Accountability for aggression, war crimes and crimes against humanity would have to be taken care of, implying that normal relations with the current regime could not be envisaged. The Netherlands has been taking the lead in working towards such accountability.

Russia's ambitions for great power status are also related to its strategy to build a multi-polar world order, in which Russia, China and the US would dominate and solve international issues on the basis of equality and sovereignty. This also implies that Moscow does not wish to return to its prior relationship with Europe. Its reorientation to a Greater Eurasia and a strengthened relationship with China would have to compensate for the loss of revenues from and relationships with Europe.

However, there remains a clear need for the EU to not only rethink its current lack of a coherent strategy towards Moscow, but also start developing a strategy for a relationship with a potential, future Russia under a new leadership, including ways to rebuild the European security order with a possibly - or hopefully - more pragmatic and less expansionist Russia.

Polish and Dutch positions on above mentioned issues are closely related and both should do their utmost to convince other EU member states to stay on the same page. The Netherlands and Poland could attempt to bridge divisions within the EU on how to deal with Russia and Russian opposition currently residing in the EU by working out a new holistic EU strategy for Russia. It should include an updated and comprehensive assessment of the current state of play of the Western-Russian relations and detailed contingency plans responding to various scenarios and social, economic and political developments in the Russian Federation.

IV. EU enlargement and Eastern Partnership

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 constituted a turning point in the history of the EU enlargement, both in terms of accepting the new eastern candidates into the process, as well as in terms of inserting much more geopolitical thinking into the EU approach . The war provoked a rethink on the possibilities of attaining a "Europe, whole and free", as originally envisaged in the early 1990s. The enlargement process currently extends to ten countries, although Turkey's accession process has been postponed *ad kalendas Graecas*. The number of candidates may increase even further in the coming years with Kosovo and possibly even Armenia. Between June 2022 and December 2023 three countries of the Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and Bosnia and Herzegovina obtained candidate status. Moreover, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in principle received a green light from the EU to start negotiations and negotiations with Albania, Moldova, Montenegro and Ukraine are progressing. Altogether, it resulted in a significant widening of the number of candidates for EU membership in comparison to the period before February 2022.

Geopolitical imperatives and issues of security seem to be the driving forces behind this process. However, the current enlargement also concerns a key issue of European civilizational/cultural identity and its global standing. In comparison to the previous accessions, this accession round faces particularly serious challenges related to the entrenchment of fundamental values (liberal democracy, rule of law) and proxy rivalry with non-European authoritarian powers. Finally, today the enlargement is strongly intertwined with the European Neighbourhood policy in the Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, because three countries from the Eastern Partnership (Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) gained candidate status and formally the rest (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus) could in principle also submit an application for candidate status. However, at the end of the day, it would be up to the European Council to accept new candidates or not.

1. Poland and the Netherlands vs. EU Enlargement

The Netherlands and Poland are EU member states, in principle supportive to further enlargement, but with differences as to strict conditionality based on the Copenhagen criteria and the importance of geopolitical considerations. The Netherlands and Poland treat Ukraine somewhat differently, as for Warsaw Ukrainian accession possesses an exceptional importance, due to many social, historical, cultural and economic ties (and sometimes problems) with its neighbour. On the other hand, the Netherlands underwent a shift in its thinking about Eastern neighbours and their importance for the EU, as before the start of the war the Netherlands was firmly against providing an accession perspective for these countries. Now the Netherlands is actively supporting Ukraine and Moldova on their path to membership. In effect, the positions of Warsaw and The Hague are currently more aligned than before the invasion as to future prospects. Whereas the Netherlands has historically paid somewhat more attention to the Western Balkans than Poland, one could also note a certain increase of the Polish interest and engagement in that region.

Poland belongs to a group of the greatest "enthusiasts" of the formal EU-enlargement process, while the position of the Netherlands is rather cautious. Like its predecessors, the current Dutch government is presenting a strict, fair and engaged approach to the accession process with an emphasis on full conditionality and complete adherence to the Copenhagen criteria. On the other hand, the Polish government is undertaking a more flexible and "generous" position in the negotiation process with an emphasis on progress. This difference in approaches also reflects to a certain extent their respective societies and electorates. According to the most recent Eurobarometer (Autumn 2024), almost 45% of Dutch respondents are against further enlargement, compared to only above 25% of Poles. However, in the case of national surveys, attitudes of Polish citizens to EU-accession of Ukraine as the most important candidate state are often ambivalent and sometimes even contradictory: there is high support for the accession in principle, but also for preconditioning Poland's support for Ukraine on the solution of remaining bilateral disputes (agriculture, but also historical issues) in line with the Polish interests. The majority of the Polish political elite subscribes -though to various degrees- to this opinion.

2. Enlargement = European and regional identity

The current EU enlargement process offers a new perspective on regional interconnectedness, particularly as it relates to a broader area encompassing South Eastern Europe, stretching from the Adriatic through the Balkans and the Black

Sea, potentially extending towards the Caucasus. The EU already has a presence within this region, with member states like Bulgaria, Greece, Hungary, and Romania. The post-2022 enlargement efforts have fostered closer ties between the Western Balkans and parts of the Eastern Partnership. This wider group of countries exhibits a diverse religious landscape, with a notable presence of Orthodox Christian and Muslim communities, alongside other faiths and secular populations. Recognising and understanding this multifaceted cultural and religious tapestry is crucial for a comprehensive assessment of the enlargement's implications, although accession criteria remain primarily focused on political and economic factors.

If the accession of this region would succeed, it will make the EU much more diverse and intertwined with the wider world. It would also help create a more stable outer ring for the Union, and thus arguably bring stability to regions that have historically been prone to turmoil that has strongly affected Western and Central Europe. Finally, the relevance of enlargement for the EU's institutional set-up also has increased greatly since 2022 because Ukraine's demographic, economic and military potential is larger than the combined potential of all other candidate states (excluding Turkey). This factor would make the institutional impact of Ukraine's possible membership comparable only to the accession of Poland in 2004 in terms of its political weight inside the EU and also in terms of financial support Kyiv would receive, including from regional and agricultural funds.

The Netherlands often presented itself as a country with a strong multi-cultural heritage, which presumably allows for better engagement with other cultures and nations. However, at the moment we can identify an increase in popularity of political forces in both countries, which are rejecting the idea of more cultural diversity and are striving to counter further immigration. Moreover, these ideas are now also becoming more mainstream. In this context, right and far-right parties present negative or ambivalent attitudes towards the accession of certain candidate-countries, particularly those inhabited by significant Muslim communities.

The political elites in both countries differ to a considerable degree on the need of internal institutional reforms within the EU and/or treaty change, including extending qualified majority voting to other areas like CFSP and CSDP to deal more effectively with decision making in an enlarged EU. This idea is perceived in an unequivocally negative way by the Polish far-right opposition and rather negatively by most of the ruling parties. Although in the Netherlands support for comprehensive internal reforms of the EU is stronger than in Poland, the current Dutch government but also many political parties are lukewarm at best about such reforms, especially if they would transfer more power to Brussels at the expense of the capitals.

3. Enlargement = strategic, security and geopolitical implications

In the first decades of the 21st century EU-enlargement transformed itself (partly in parallel to NATO enlargement) into a mostly bureaucratic "technocratic" process of changing legislation in conformity with EU-rules. It was often perceived within the EU as possessing a very limited strategic dimension and only a weak link to the wider security of Europe. However, the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine brought security-related issues back to the very top of the EU agenda and shaped Ukraine (and Moldova) into a key arena of geopolitical rivalry between the EU and Russia. This has also raised questions about future relations with the South Caucasus, but in light of the EU's limited capabilities and leverage these relations have not gained the same priority for the EU as Ukraine and Moldova. The Western Balkans are in a somewhat different position, as they are surrounded by EU member states, although also there EU interests are sometimes colliding with other external geopolitical players there as well: Türkiye with its own agenda and hybrid political system as well as external powers, like the US, Russia, China and the Gulf states. As a consequence, after 2022 the enlargement regained its fundamental strategical character as a key instrument not only of pursuing further alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy(CFSP) with sometimes mixed results, as the example of Serbia would show.

The Netherlands and Poland are EU member states with an increasing awareness of the correlation between enlargement and security/geopolitics, although in Poland this is even stronger present for historical and geopolitical reasons than in the Netherlands. In the new circumstances the EU should rethink the geopolitical aspects of enlargement. This would also include a discussion on the *finalité* of the EU: how far to enlarge when this also would imply taking the European security commitments seriously, as enshrined in the EU Treaty Article 42.7. Poland stresses that the accession of new member states should improve the EU's security and its geopolitical standing on the world stage. The Netherlands is more pragmatic and was slower in responding to the new challenges, but the closeness of their positions is presently confirmed by their robust bilateral and multilateral military, humanitarian and financial aid to Ukraine (approx. 1% of GDP in the case of both countries, 7-8th place in the EU). Moreover, Poland hosts almost million Ukrainian refugees, the second largest group after Germany, while the Netherlands also hosts up to 120 thousand Ukrainians at present. Finally, the Netherlands and Poland are engaged in various EU missions in the Western Balkans, Moldova and the South Caucasus. But how security could be strengthened by further enlargement should still be a topic for further discussion, including by closely considering the costs and benefits for the EU as a whole.

4. Enlargement = Implications for democracy and rule of law

The current enlargement is more challenging to the EU than previous accessions, because the candidate states are now dealing with much more serious deficits concerning liberal democracy and rule of law than their predecessors. For instance, all current candidates are recognized by Freedom House as "partly free" countries. Moreover, democratic backsliding and dismantling of the rule of law have recently been on the rise in several countries of South-Eastern Europe (especially in candidates Georgia, Bosnia and Herzegovina: *Republika Srpska* and Serbia). Meanwhile, in many countries of the region the stagnation of democratization or its very modest progress and persistence of rampant corruption prevail. On the other hand, most probably without the enlargement perspective, we would see an even steeper downward trend. Indeed, Georgia's most recent authoritarian back-sliding represents a striking example of strong correlation between de-democratisation and the rejection of the EU accession by the ruling party, which can also be envisaged as a success for Russia's continuing hybrid war efforts and disinformation.

What is new, in comparison to the previous enlargements, is that serious and unprecedented anti-democratic trends can also be observed within the EU, for instance in Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and especially in Hungary and rule of law issues are playing an increasing role across the whole of the EU. Also transborder "cooperation" between politicians with authoritarian and illiberal inclinations from both EU member states and candidate countries is deepening. Recent involvement from the US in the internal politics of EU member states in support of populist and far-right parties is a new and disturbing factor. On the other hand, massive pro-democratic protests and some elections lost by autocratic and illiberal forces in recent years confirm that the resilience of a democracy entrenched in a strong civil society could still constitute a key firewall allowing candidate countries to defend themselves against external meddling and democratic backsliding. Finally, the de-democratization is closely interconnected with the geopolitical rivalry and fundamental threats to security. Russia's and China's engagement/interference in the region undermines fragile democracies and favours authoritarian leaders. Unfortunately, the US under Trump may even further encourage these negative trends in a wider South-Eastern Europe.

Currently, Poland and the Netherlands are among those EU member states highlighting the importance of promoting liberal democratic values and the rule of law in the candidate countries. As such, rule of law is one of the main priorities of the Polish EU Presidency. However, they differ to a considerable degree regarding their

approaches to the role this must play in the enlargement process. Poland believes that the acceleration of accession process is needed to consolidate democracy in candidate states (more carrot than stick), while the Netherlands stresses the necessity of strict conditionality during the process in order to avoid the reversal of democratization which occurred even in some member states (more stick than carrot).

5. Eastern Partnership = a new opening?

At first glance the Eastern Partnership (EaP) seems obsolete because of enormous diversity of the group. Indeed, the granting of candidate status to Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, Armenia's possible submission of a candidate application, accompanied by the authoritarian profiles of Azerbaijan and Belarus that show no sign of abating, questions the prospects of holding this divergent group of countries together as one consolidated (sub-)region.

Moreover, the EU's ability to exert influence in Azerbaijan or Belarus remains very constrained, due to the resilience of both authoritarian regimes and Russia's increasing integration with Belarus. However, current repression makes it rather difficult to hold trustworthy opinion polls. It remains to be seen, how far some possible re-engagement of the EU with the Belarusian regime could increase leverage and prevent a full Russian take-over of the country. Warsaw and The Hague belong to a small group within the EU, currently providing Belarusian civil society in exile with considerable financial and institutional support. They assume that this assistance represents a long-term investment which will repay itself if the regime in Belarus would fall, opening prospects for renewed democratization. Nevertheless, both Poland and the Netherlands assume that the Belarusian diaspora needs reactivation in order to avoid stagnation and passivity. Furthermore, for Poland relations with Belarus represent more of a geopolitical and security challenge, because of history and proximity, whereas for the Netherlands support for Belarusian civil society mainly fits into a wider tradition of promoting democracy and human rights. Finally, both Poland and the Netherlands believe that the EaP should not be abandoned or terminated (perfect is the enemy of the good), however, it needs to be reinvigorated. In fact, Poland will present a paper on the reform of the EaP during its Presidency.

V. Conclusions and recommendations

1. The Netherlands and Poland should be closely cooperating in fully supporting Ukraine, including in security and defence. They should strengthen intra-European cooperation, both within NATO and within the EU and invest in close cooperation between the two organizations. If broad agreement within the EU is not deemed possible, Poland and the Netherlands should take the lead in building coalitions of the willing to provide such military and financial, economic and humanitarian support as needed. This would also extend to other candidate countries, especially Moldova, and should strengthen their resilience against external interference. Poland and the Netherlands should attempt to strengthen Ukraine's position for if and when negotiations about a just and sustainable peace might start and take a leading role in Ukrainian reconstruction. Both countries could also work closely together in assisting in the return of Ukrainian refugees, once it would be safe for them to go back and assist in rebuilding Ukraine.

2. The Netherlands and Poland are both well placed to invest in Transatlantic cooperation, even when faced by uncertainties with an increasingly transactional president in the White House. Both countries should strive for a place at the table for Ukraine and the EU in any negotiations about ending the war and a new European security order and present ideas and proposals which will assure a deal guaranteeing Ukraine's independence and the sovereignty of Europe. If Russia would accept a ceasefire agreement, this could also imply the organization of a peacekeeping operation, which would be mainly composed of European military forces, involving possibly Poland and the Netherlands and with a strong mandate and US backing.

3. Strengthening European defence and fundamental investments in European defence industries are needed in the coming years, including a substantial

increase in national defence budgets and finding creative ways of EU financing for defence (if necessary also by making use of EU loans). The recent proposals by the EU on ReArm should form the basis for such efforts. Poland and the Netherlands should prepare together with other EU member states (coalition of the willing) a detailed list of defence projects that they could implement in joint-ventures (pooling and sharing). Poland and the Netherlands agree that also non-EU arms producers, like South Korea, could be involved in European rearmament.

4. The Netherlands and Poland could cooperate more closely on strengthening the Eastern flank of NATO and could work towards stationing more permanent forces and pre-positioning stockpiles in Poland and the Baltic and Black Sea states and take further measures to strengthen deterrence, as long as Russia pursues its aggressive policies towards Europe. They could also cooperate closely to protect underwater infrastructure in the Baltic Sea, both in NATO and bilaterally. Bilateral military cooperation should be complementary to NATO (and possible EU) efforts and projects, like on military mobility and should be based on the MoU between the Dutch and Polish ministries of defence (currently under consideration).

5. The Netherlands and Poland should invest in projects and initiatives focused on strengthening awareness and resilience in dealing with hybrid threats in the EU, EaP and WB and learn from civil defence experience in countries like Finland and Sweden. Both within the EU and in trilateral/quadrilateral formats, Poland and the Netherlands could strengthen such awareness, not limiting themselves to expert discussions and cooperation between intelligence agencies, but also involving broader groups from their respective civil societies. Closer contacts and exchanges with the Baltic states could enhance a sense of urgency, which especially in the Netherlands seems to be lacking. Poland and the Netherlands could also act as a bridge to other EU member states in southern Europe in sharing such experience.

6. More exchanges and discussions between Polish and Dutch citizens could also contribute to a convergence of the respective threat perceptions and more understanding for the nature and consequences of the war in Ukraine. Whereas there is a general agreement on the threats related to Russia's aggressive actions, including in the hybrid sphere, such threats are still seen as less urgent in the Netherlands, compared to some domestic issues. More engagement and contacts between societies could help in bridging the gap

between diverging perspectives as to the need to consider this security threat as the number one priority.

7. The Netherlands and Poland should invest in strengthening resilience in EaP and WB countries, while also learning from experience of Ukraine and Baltic states in particular. This could be in hybrid and cyber spheresbut also learning on how best to cope with disinformation and other forms of malign foreign interference. The defence of democracy in the EaP and the WB requires from the EU to assist these countries (administration, media, civil society) in their fight against external interference (Russia, China and others). Poland and the Netherlands should together underpin projects in this field strengthening resilience by sharing know-how, best practices and technology (cyber security) and assure staff training, especially in countries where pro-Russian feelings are stronger.

8. The maintenance of current momentum behind the enlargement constitutes a strategic goal for the EU. It requires a comprehensive rethinking of this policy by the EU to rephrase it as a strategic, geopolitical project with a clear regional dimension which is tightly intertwined with democratization and would be a key tool for closer alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. In principle, Poland and the Netherlands are in a good position to develop an outline of a new enlargement strategy together, if they could bridge their internal differences. In fact, if they can reach agreement, Poland and the Netherlands could use their "unity in diversity" to reach out with their ideas to all member states as credible "brain-stormers" and "bridge-builders".

9. Nevertheless, the Netherlands and Poland can play a role of proponents (and experts) of the enlargement only if they engage in open dialogue with their own citizens and convince them to endorse the accession of new countries by increasing knowledge about them and countering negative stereotypes, resentments and prejudices (through information, educational and social campaigns) expressed towards the inhabitants of the Eastern Europe and the Western Balkans and immigrants and refugees from these regions living in the Netherlands and Poland. Certainly, both countries need to deal with problems originating from the immigration from the regions but should do that in a responsible way, avoiding populism.

10. Democratic backsliding and stagnation of democratization in many candidate states have to be reversed in order to accelerate accession process. Polish NGOs with the financial support of Brussels, the Hague and Warsaw should

share lessons (successes and failures) from Poland's experience since 2015 with civil societies of the WB and EaP. The Netherlands NGOs could share their experience in assisting civil society in this region to transform countries into more democratic societies, built on the rule of law. The Netherlands and Poland need to promote coordination of projects implemented in both regions by the EU members. For instance, Poland has already suggested the establishment of a database with all national projects operated by the EU member states in both regions.

11. An increase of financial and organizational support of the EU for civil society in the wider South-Eastern Europe constitutes the best recipe for the strengthening of democratic endurance and resilience. Therefore, the Netherlands and Poland should intensify cooperation between their own NGOs and local governments with partners in the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership in all possible fields and not only in bilateral formats. For instance, the triangle Breda-Lviv-Wrocław could serve as a source of inspiration. Particularly, the quadrilaterals (cities and NGOs from the Netherlands, Poland, the WB and the EaP) could be formats to be explored.

12. A long term social embedding of the enlargement in the WB and EaP will depend to a large degree on the pre-accession integration of young people within the EU. Therefore, as many students from the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus as possible should be given the opportunity to enrol in universities in the EU or join the Erasmus+ program and participate in study visits. Polish and Dutch universities can attract them by creating new incentives, programs and initiatives in multilateral formats. At the same time, Polish and Dutch universities should activate students from the wider South Eastern Europe in assisting their self-organization (associations, unions). Both governments should ensure sufficient funding for those European studies, which are relevant for understanding these countries and regions (including area studies). The Europe Hub of Leiden University and the College of Europe in Natolin could play a stimulating role in this respect.

13. Historical disputes among states covered by the enlargement and between them and EU member states represent an important challenge to maintaining the current pace of the accession process and hinder regional cooperation. More projects are needed that will involve historians from Poland and the Netherlands and the above-mentioned countries in order to discuss these issues, bridge differences, find new innovative solutions and reach compromises.

14. As far as the EaP is concerned, it should be continued but at the same time "tuned" to a new, very diverse reality. Poland and the Netherlands could work out a more detailed outline of new model of the EaP which will focus on connectivity and economic cooperation treating the region as a gateway to the Middle East or to Central Asia and on to China.

15. An "eternal" endurance of autocratic regimes in Azerbaijan and especially Belarus should not be taken for granted. Particularly, a possible internal crisis in Russia might have a trigger effect on Belarus. However, in the meantime, the Netherlands and Poland should continue their support for for the Belarusian democratic forces and civil society in Belarus (e.g. through EED) and in exile. At the same time, the Belarusian diaspora needs more targeted support, as do independent media channels. Initiatives such as Kościuszko Forum, an international summit of Belarusian NGOs, independent media and democratic opposition co-funded by Poland and the EU could serve as an example. Its next edition could be hosted in the Netherlands.

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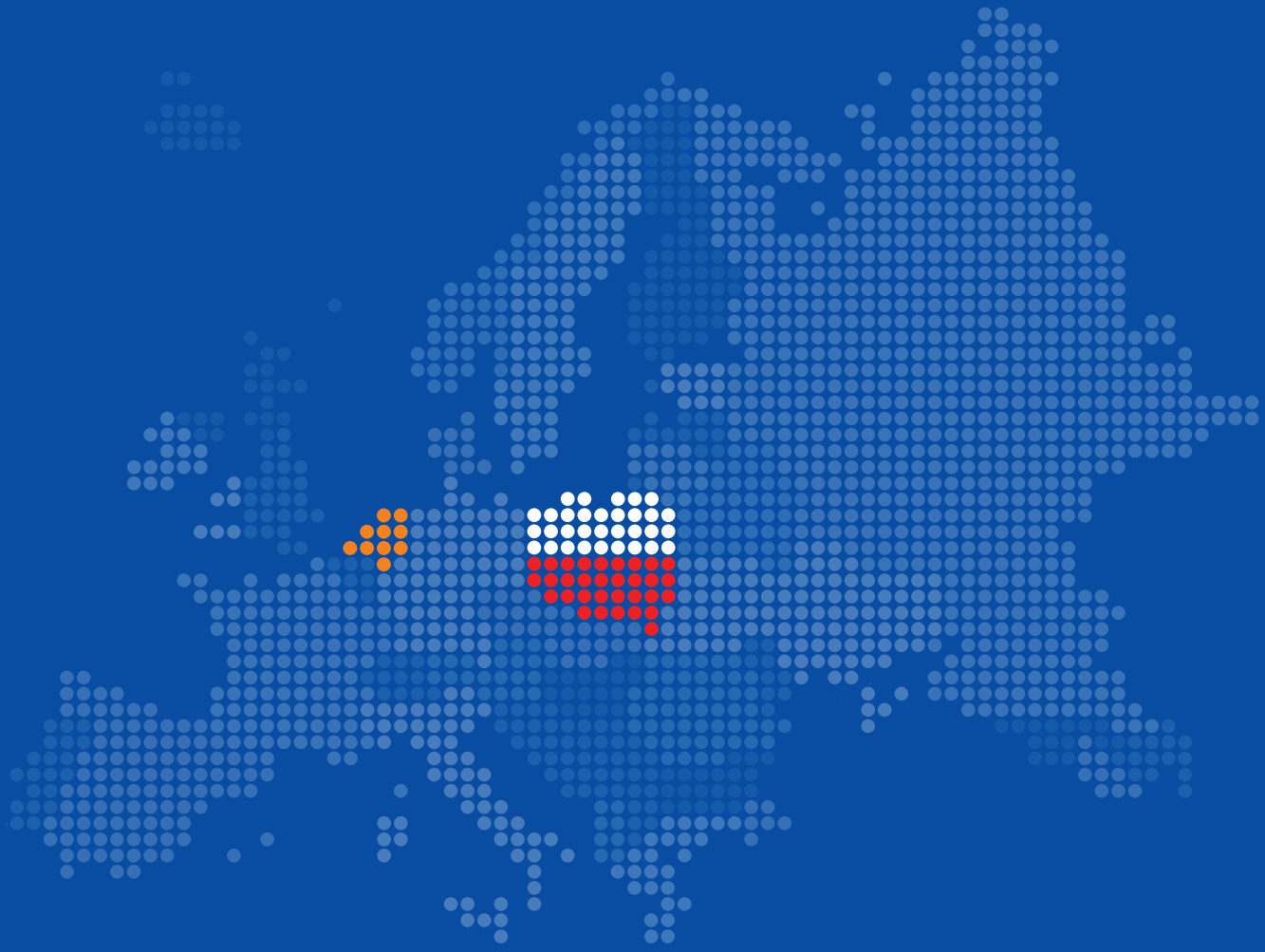

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