

Introduction:

On 18 May 2025, Poland will hold its next presidential election, and for us, this means that we must once again closely monitor what is happening in our neighbours' country, because the results of this election will determine whether Poland, our "biggest" partner neighbour, will remain favourable to Ukraine for the next five years.

The current President of Poland, Andrzej Duda, is completing his second consecutive presidential term, and under Polish law, he is not eligible to run in these elections, so in any scenario, we will see a new person in this position.

Who are the potential candidates?

The following politicians have put forward their candidacies for these elections:

- Mayor of Warsaw Rafal Trzaskowski
- President of the Institute of National Remembrance Karol Nawrocki
- Leader of the Poland 2050 party and Marshal of the Sejm Szymon Holownia
- Magdalena Bejat, Deputy Speaker of the Senate, candidate from the Left Party
- Slavomir Menczen from the Confederation Party
- MP Marek Jakubjak from the Free Republicans circle
- Marek Woch from the non-partisan Local Government Association

However, Rafal Trzaskowski and Karol Nawrocki are considered the biggest favourites.

Position on the Ukrainian issue and other security issues:

- **Rafal Trzaskowski** believes that Ukraine's accession to the European Union is a matter of Poland's security and should not be questioned.
 - "It is important for us that Russian tanks are not stationed five kilometres from Hrubieszów if, God forbid, something bad happens. Poland's security is of paramount importance, and this should not be toyed with; the jokes are really over. Anyone who questions this in political debates is harming the interests of the Republic of Poland," said Rafal Trzaskowski.
- He has also repeatedly stated that he admires Trump's position on European defence capabilities and has declared that Poland is a leader in Europe on this issue.
 - "We must have and will have the most modern army in Europe, but why don't our partners in Europe understand this? We must convince them of this, both in the North Atlantic Alliance and in the European Union."
 - He also considers it absurd that the Germans, who "have an economy nine times larger than ours, nominally spend almost as much money on security as we do, or not much more. This is scandalous, ladies and gentlemen," said Trzaskowski.
- He also made some controversial statements, particularly regarding payments to Ukrainians. He proposed abolishing the 800+ programme – a monthly payment of 800 zlotys per child – for Ukrainians who are not employed.

- “This approach has been sharply criticised at the expert level, because if we look at the statistics, we see that about 78% of the Ukrainian diaspora is employed. This is an absolutely fantastic result, which is not found among other refugee groups or in other European Union countries. As a result, Ukrainians pay much more into the Polish state budget from their taxes than they receive in social assistance. In addition, this 800+ programme for Polish citizens is in no way related to employment. In other words, this is a clearly discriminatory exception,” writes European Truth.
- Tshaskovsky can count on the support of centrist and pro-European voters, especially in urban areas. His pragmatic stance on defence and economic policy could be a key factor in winning over more moderate voters.
- **Karol Nawrocki** has stated that if elected president, Poland will continue to support Ukraine "in the face of the threat from the Russian Federation, which is also hostile towards Poland".
However, our partners should know that politics is governed by the rule of reciprocity, he noted.
- Nawrocki said that with regard to Ukraine, "Poland has done and is doing more than we thought we could do." "We feel that we have done a good job with regard to our partner, which finds itself in existential danger due to the post-Soviet Russian Federation," he said, referring to the reception of Ukrainian refugees and the transfer of military equipment.
- "At the same time, Poland represents, and I want this to be clear, its own interests and its own society. Therefore, it cannot afford to take actions

which will deal a blow to our own economy, agriculture, and the wealth of Poles' wallets."

- Speaking about the start of full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine on 24 February 2022, Nawrocki noted that "it was Poland that woke up its European partners in the last days of February 2022." "Without our country's support, Ukraine could have fallen in the first days of the war, despite the heroism, dedication and sacrifice of the Ukrainian armed forces," he said.
- In January, Karol Nawrocki stated that he did not see a country in the EU or other alliances that could not acknowledge its historical crimes, apparently alluding to the Volhynia tragedy.
- In summary, Karol Nawrocki holds conservative and nationalist views, often playing on historical memory, patriotic sentiments and issues of national identity. His rhetoric on the Volhynia tragedy, relations with Ukraine, and the need to "defend Polish interests before the EU" has signs of populism, as he appeals to voters' emotions, using historical traumas to mobilise the electorate. His statements that Poland should reconsider its support for Ukraine until historical issues are resolved can be seen as a classic populist move: creating an image of an "external enemy" and promising to "restore justice," which should appeal to part of the right-wing electorate.

- **Slawomir Menczen** - it is worth mentioning this candidate briefly, as he is the most likely "third place" in these elections, and it is for his electorate that Nawrocki and Trzaskowski will most likely compete in the second round, as sociologists give Menczen as much as 8 to 15 per cent.
- He is a candidate from the Confederation coalition and leader of the far-right New Hope party. He has stated that as president he will be the most active of Poland's heads of state, who, in his opinion, currently function as "puppets" of their party leaders.
- When it comes to Ukraine, he's a pretty controversial guy. He's against peacekeeping initiatives in Ukraine, saying that Poland will never fight for Ukrainian territories. Plus, he's in line with the Confederation's policy, which is known for its critical stance on giving social benefits to Ukrainian refugees.
- At the same time, he considers Poland's security to be one of his priorities and says that despite the real threat of armed conflict, Polish defence is in a "pitiful state" due to the situation in the armed forces, which, according to him, are struggling with a shortage of equipment and reservists, whose average age is around 50.

The issue of the Volhynia tragedy:

We all know that the issue of the Volhynia tragedy in Ukrainian-Polish relations is a stumbling block that prevents us from having completely friendly relations between our countries. The Volhynia tragedy is an important element of Polish politics of memory and national identity. Various political forces use this issue to

mobilising the electorate and emphasising patriotic sentiments. In particular, conservative and nationalist parties focus on the need for historical justice and recognition by the Ukrainian side of guilt for the events of 1943. Karol Nawrocki, in particular, talks about this issue the most.

A little context and why this issue always reaches an impasse:

The main reason for the constant disputes is the different interpretations of historical events by the parties. The Polish side insists on recognising the Volhynia tragedy as genocide of the Polish people, while Ukrainian historians point to the mutual nature of the violence and the complexity of the historical context. Most often, Poles refer to the events of 11-12 July 1943. According to Polish experts, on the eve of the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul, Ukrainian troops destroyed about a hundred villages in Volhynia, and in the village of Porytsk, UPA troops burned down the local church, where about 200 people had gathered for a service to mark the holiday.

Ukrainian historians have never denied the events in Porytsk, but at the same time they emphasised that Soviet saboteurs, who often operated in Volhynia under the guise of UPA troops, could have been involved in these events.

Current developments in this matter:

In January 2025, Ukraine agreed to allow the exhumation of the remains of Poles who died during the Volhynia tragedy. This decision was the result of a meeting between Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky. The Polish side considers this a significant step forward, which will allow Polish families to properly

bury their relatives properly. In the Ternopil region, on the territory of the former village of Puzhnyky, exhumation work on the victims of the Volhynia tragedy will begin in April this year.

Given recent developments, the issue of the Volhynia tragedy is gradually moving from the phase of political disputes to practical action. We are finally trying to find a constructive dialogue, and the role of such a dialogue, which is also accompanied by real actions, is definitely a positive aspect in this matter. It is important to continue working on this, but we must remember that such issues cannot be resolved by one side alone, so in the context of the upcoming elections, we must understand with whom and how we will have to work, because Navrotsky or the Confederation will clearly not be "easy to get on board" in resolving these issues. In fact, this is one of their main drivers of pressure on the current government, as well as, unfortunately, a "populist toy" that they get before the elections to play on people's emotions. Here, Ukrainian diplomacy and civil society must be prepared to respond appropriately and not allow themselves to be dragged into yet another political scandal.

Regarding the recent scandal involving Zelensky and Navrotsky:

On 15 January, when Volodymyr Zelenskyy was visiting Warsaw, a scandal erupted involving our president, the PiS party and one of the presidential candidates, Karol Nawrocki. During an interview, Volodymyr Zelensky stated that if Ukraine does not have security guarantees, Karol Nawrocki may "have to take up arms to defend the country together with his compatriots." This was our president's response to Nawrocki's statement that he does not see Ukraine

in the European Union and NATO until Polish issues are resolved, in particular the exhumation of the victims of the Volhynia tragedy.

Even the Poles themselves cannot decide among themselves who is to blame. PiS is calling it a scandal and demanding an apology, while the government coalition considers Karol Nawrocki's statement inappropriate.

PiS MEP Tobiasz Bochenki believes that the Ukrainian president has made a "diplomatic mistake".

- “Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s statement is scandalous. It is a diplomatic blunder, proof that Donald Tusk’s Poland is a banana republic, and that the leader of a foreign country feels he can interfere in our election campaign. This is simply unacceptable. President Zelenskyy must apologise for this.”

According to Dariusz Jonski, a Member of the European Parliament from the Civic Coalition, Karol Nawrocki's words were inappropriate and contrary to Poland's interests.

- “The destruction of those good relations now, when we are talking about Poland being the main hub where we could rebuild and also earn money from the reconstruction of Ukraine, the words of Bochenki and those PiS politicians who are going crazy over the president’s visit are unbelievable, and this cannot be allowed.”

Such moments perfectly demonstrate how much the Volhynia issue and Ukrainian-Polish relations in general are becoming a field for internal political struggle in Poland, especially on the eve of elections. Zelensky's statement may seem harsh, and opponents of the Polish government are already using it to accuse him of interfering in internal politics.

But if you look at it from another angle, his words sent a clear message: Ukraine and Poland's support for it are not just a whim of our government — they are in the direct interest of all our neighbours, including Poland, and the lack of this support is a direct path to armed conflict in Poland itself, and then there will be no room for political disputes.

Conclusions:

The 2025 presidential elections in Poland are not just an internal political struggle for us, but an event that will have serious consequences for Ukraine. The main candidates are divided into two camps: some see us as a strategic partner, while others see us as a problem that needs to be constantly raised in political discussions. Karol Nawrocki and the Confederation are actively playing on historical issues, in particular the Volhynia tragedy, using it as a means of putting pressure on the current government. It is important for Ukraine who wins, because not only military and economic support depends on it, but also the prospect of our integration into the EU and NATO.

It is clear that Ukraine could not remain on the sidelines of these elections. The issues of our support, assistance and common security have become part of the Polish election campaign. The scandal with Karol Nawrocki only emphasised this: Zelensky may have spoken harshly, but he sent a clear signal – if Ukraine is not supported, Poland itself will become the next target. And while some politicians try to play on historical grievances, others understand that without cooperation with Ukraine, Poland's future is also at risk.

As for the Volhynia issue, it remains painful and difficult, but the ice has begun to move. Permission to exhume Polish victims is a serious step forward that offers a chance for reconciliation. Unfortunately, however, this topic is still a convenient tool and "toy" for populists. Before elections, it is actively brought up to play on people's emotions, but whether those same politicians are ready for real dialogue is another question.

Overall, Poland remains an important partner for us, and much will depend on the results of these elections, as with any elections in Ukraine's partner countries. Our diplomacy must be ready to work with any government in Warsaw – even those who are currently criticising us the most, and this will be a serious challenge to our professionalism. But the main thing is not to allow history to be manipulated and to continue the dialogue, which is ultimately beneficial to both sides.

Where did I get the information:

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