DOI: 10.14746/pp.2026.31.2.2

POLAND AND OUR GEOPOLITICAL MOMENT

Francis Fukuyama
Stanford University

e-mail: f.fukuyama@stanford.edu

The history of Poland was critical to the history of Europe as a whole over the course of seven centuries. The Grand Duchy of Lithuania and its successor the Polish-Lithuanian Union was a one time one of the largest political entities on the continent. It had the misfortune, however, of being caught between several other large empires, and disappeared in three successive partitions in the late 18th century. Poland re-emerged after the First World War as a sovereign country, only to be swallowed up again after the Nazi-Soviet Pact, re-appearing in 1945 as a war-ravaged satellite of the Soviet Union. It was only in 1989 that the country could emerge finally as a fully sovereign and democratic nation, standing at the core of a new Europe "whole and free."

Since that time, Poland has developed into one of the most influential countries in the European Union, anchoring its eastern flank and standing as a strong opponent of a resurgent Russia. Over the past three centuries, Poland has suffered all of the depredations that geopolitics has to offer, like war, invasion, ethnic cleansing, and dictatorship, and has nonetheless taken its place as one of the pillars of democracy in an environment that remains geopolitically challenging.

Today Europe and the West more generally are facing a grave challenge to the very concept of a Europe "whole and free." Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated quite clearly that he regards the collapse of the former Soviet Union to have been a great tragedy, and has outlined an historical mission for himself in re-creating as much of the Soviet empire as possible. Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has led to the largest land war since World War II, producing a million casualties on the Russian side and a somewhat smaller but still catastrophic number for Ukraine. The war at this point continues to look stalemated, especially after the United States under Donald

Article published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 4.0 license
(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/)

Trump has reduced its level of military support and given up on the idea of a negotiated ceasefire. As the Ukraine war continues, Russia has stepped up its hybrid attacks on Europe and NATO members, including Poland and the Baltic states, opening up the serious possibility of a wider European war. This overt use of force by an authoritarian great power suggests the possibility of similar developments on the other side of the world, as the People's Republic of China contemplates strategies for re-incorporating Taiwan.

Great power challenges to the liberal world order are not new; what is new is the growth of populist-nationalist movements within existing liberal democracies that have challenged existing political parties. When in power, these movements have pushed illiberal policies that have weakened the role of law and concentrated power in executive branches. In some cases, these parties have become so hostile to the status quo that they have built ties with Russia and China, and have blocked collective action by NATO and the EU to defend Ukraine.

The most important case of populist nationalism is today the United States, a country that was responsible for creating that liberal world order in the first place. America's president has appeared more sympathetic towards the authoritarian leaders of Russia, China, and North Korea than he has towards his democratic counterparts, and is currently seeking to shift the global economy way from free trade to protectionism and national autarky.

My own career has tracked the rise and fall of the post-1989 liberal European order. I was in Gdansk with President George W. Bush and Lech Wałęsa in the summer of 1989 as a young State Department official, and visited Berlin a week before the fall of the Berlin Wall. For me this was far and away the most momentous political event I had ever experienced, as the US and Europe transited out of the Cold War into a very different and more democratic world. I was in the Vatican for a conference in 2004 shortly after Poland entered the European Union. At the luncheon, I sat at a table with a German minister who had served in the Wehrmacht during World War II, and a Polish leader who had fought in the resistance against Germany. It seemed to me that their mutual celebration of Polish accession at that event was testimony to the enormous success of the European Union in bringing both peace and prosperity to Europe.

I was also in Kyiv in the fall of 2013, just before the Maidan uprising and the Revolution of Dignity, when young Ukrainians decisively rejected alignment with Moscow and cast their lot with Europe. Over the next decade, I made

many trips to Ukraine, teaching in programs that sought to train mid-career professionals the skills necessary to build democratic institutions. I came to Kyiv the last time in 2024, and visited a recovery center for Ukrainian soldiers who had lost limbs in fighting the Russians. I find myself today living in an age where liberalism as a doctrine is being attacked by anti-system radicals on both the left and the right, on grounds that seem hardly appropriate to the actual conditions our societies are facing.

Liberalism often has trouble defending itself, because it worships no strong gods at its core and is open to a range of ways of life and political opinions. It is a political system that deals pragmatically with the existence of diversity in contemporary societies. As such, it is frequently most highly prized when it is absent, that is, when people have direct experience of life under a dictatorship. I can't help but feel that that is part of the present problem: our liberal world order has been so successful over the years that younger generations have grown up taking peace and prosperity for granted. Let us hope that we do not have to repeat Poland's tragic history in the 20th century before we appreciate once again the value of liberal democracy that is whole, free, and sovereign.

Biographical note
Francis Fukuyama is Olivier Nomellini Senior Fellow at the Freeman Spogli Institute for International Affairs at Stanford University.