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Germany, Poland and the EU

With growing distrust on both sides of the German-Polish border, a new rapprochement seems urgently needed

Throughout history, the Polish-German relation has been traumatic. The drama of partitions and the atrocities of WW2 had only slowly been overcome, first by the 'change through rapprochement' approach of Willy Brandt's new Eastern Policy, then by the symbolic embrace in Krzyżowa, a 'Polish-German community of interests' resulting in the normalisation of Polish-German relations.

Germany and Poland have grown even closer together after the latter joined the EU in 2004, with economic ties becoming a significant element of mutual relations. For example, in 2018, trade in goods between Germany in Poland was worth €118bn, with Germany being the main export country for Poland, and Poland – on par with the UK – the sixth biggest trading partner for Germany. This intense geo-economic relation is complemented by a close interpersonal one: Polish migrants and citizens with Polish background are the second biggest diaspora in Germany contributing to the multicultural landscape of the country.

Still, in spite of an unprecedented reconciliation success, Polish-German relations seem ambivalent, especially if compared with the Franco-German tandem. Around half of Germans and French declare appreciation of their neighbour and around two-thirds feel this relationship is stable. On the other hand, there's a visible discrepancy in the perception of Polish-German relations: 56 per cent of Poles and only 29 per cent of Germans feel sympathy towards the neighbouring country. Moreover, 64 per cent of Poles perceive German-Polish relations as good, compared with only 31 per cent of Germans.

Of course, these popular attitudes are also susceptible to political dynamics. There were big hopes in Emmanuel Macron to rejuvenate the Franco-German engine, before he clashed with Chancellor Angela Merkel over NATO or did not find support for his vision of further EU economic integration, especially within the Eurozone. But even if the chemistry between German and French leaders is not particularly good at the moment, it cannot beat the ice age in Polish-German relations.

Recalibrating Poland's national interest

Since 1989, Poland has often been presented as a showpiece for the Eastern Europe's transition: its economic miracle, successful political transformation and handling relations with its neighbours often tainted by difficult history were said to stand out. This success culminated in the country joining the EU in 2004, striking a new development path and establishing its new role in Europe.

Under the 7-year long leadership of Prime Minister Donald Tusk (today the President of the European People's Party), Poland became a meaningful player in Brussels, sitting at one table with other eurostars, like Germany, France and Italy. Therefore, the victory of the national-conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) in October 2015 came as a shock for the European community.

The new government embarked on a clear collision course with the EU, mostly on the issue of rule of law and judicial independence, also launching harsh euro-sceptic rhetoric and transforming the sovereignty discourse – from a space of freedom and democracy to preserving national identity. However, the ruling party also presents a strong anti-German sentiment, in particular through its lawmakers' political communication and government-controlled public media, for instance the recurring demands for WW2 reparations.

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This rhetoric resonates well with its electorate and is instrumentalised mostly for domestic political gains. But nevertheless, it also reflects a broader agenda. The current authorities in Warsaw not only see the Polish interest different than their predecessors but also apply a fundamentally different approach (and style) to realise it. Jarosław Kaczyński, the PiS leader, is vocal about his distrust in its western neighbour, seeing German interests as contradicting Poland's goals and ambitions.

The efforts to be a counterweight to the alleged German hegemony in the EU have led Poland under the PiS leadership to build closer relations with the US, in particular in the realm of security policy. Paradoxically, Donald Trump's administration, viewed by many European partners as an obscurity if not a threat, seems to present an opportunity for the Polish leadership to strengthen the country's security by granting American military presence in Poland.

The intensification of US-Poland bilateral relation – parallel to NATO structures and beyond the 'European sovereignty' concept – is a clear manifestation of the current government's view on (united) Europe and EU's defence autonomy. For them, the German and French idea of building European defence autonomy independently of the US triggers the immanent anxiety of imagined German dominance in Europe – and leaves it vulnerable to Russia. Poland's direct neighbourhood with Putin's Russia, mixed with the general Russia-scepticism of the Polish right, prompts even more concerns about the country's security. As a result, there's little space for manoeuvre to find a win-win solution, especially when accompanied by the US President's anti-German and anti-EU rants.

Which future for Poland – and Europe?

The current impasse in the governmental dialogue between Poland and Germany doesn't escalate in theatrical twitter brawls, but rather manifests in cool courtesy and ritualised gestures. At the same time, the economic bond blossoms unharmed – and so does citizen diplomacy through tourism or cultural exchange.

Nevertheless, Germany's deep distrust of the current political elites in Poland – combined with its new geopolitical orientation – will not only harm the Polish-German relations long-term but also affect European policies. The current Polish government leans towards an alternative vision of the EU, opting for a union of economic benefits for nation states and a less federalised model.

At the same time, Poland has become marginalised within the EU. While searching for alternative allies like the US, the Polish government creates competition within NATO, contributing to its crisis mood. From the German perspective, recent developments in Poland not only seem bizarre; they must be a disappointment too. After all, it was Germany's effort to help the eastern neighbour pave its way into the EU. Today's frosty vibe between Warsaw and Berlin only deepens the gap and isolation of Poland in Europe. With the PiS party and its junior coalition partners again in majority government, it's not likely to change any time soon.

However, Poland will face a presidential election in May 2020. In October 2019, the surprising victory of the opposition in the Senate, the upper chamber of the Polish parliament, gives many a glimmer of hope. As a supreme representative of the Polish state, the President plays a special role in the international arena. Should the re-election of the

incumbent president Andrzej Duda, supported by the PiS party, not succeed, it could mean a fresh start for Polish foreign policy and an opportunity for a relaunch in Polish-German relations.

The candidate of the United Left, Robert Biedroń, has already announced in his campaign inauguration speech that he will use his best efforts to end the feud with Germany and revitalise the Weimar Triangle of three European leaders. He also recognised the EU as a cornerstone of Poland's economic and geopolitical security. A conciliatory approach and continuing a proactive European policy can also be expected from the candidate of the Civic Platform, the party of Donald Tusk. But only time will tell whether and when a more optimistic scenario for Polish-German relations and the EU will materialise.



Maria Skóra
Berlin

Dr Maria Skóra is a Policy Fellow at the German think tank *Das Progressive Zentrum*. She was previously a research fellow at the *Institut für Europäische Politik*. She holds an MA in sociology and a PhD in Economics.