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How the Polish-German relationship turned sour

Poland's PiS may try to build not only an illiberal but also anti-German coalition in Europe — making it a tough partner for Germany's new government

After the end of the Merkel era, Germany's newly formed progressive coalition heralds a wind of change in German politics. But the new government will have to face old challenges, unsolved by the departing cabinet. One of them remains the bumpy relationship with Germany's eastern neighbour, Poland.

The Polish-German relationship has not been easy. The reconciliation process initiated by Willy Brandt and Egon Bahr in the 1970s was slow and arduous, finally resulting in a historic Treaty of Good Neighbourship. Germany was a strong proponent of Poland's accession to NATO and the EU, which brought Polish-German relations to yet another level. The German labour market completely opened for Poles in 2011; economic exchange blossomed. The project of bringing the two nations closer together also steadily advanced. Within the last two decades, both neighbours developed positive mutual perceptions and the majority is convinced that bilateral relations are rather good.

It seemed that, once and for all, historical animosities were overcome. The reconciliation was so successful, that some were even reflecting if Warsaw could replace Paris in German European policy, or at least if the Franco-German tandem should not be expanded into a leadership trio. But not only the *Weimar Triangle* of France, Germany, and Poland seems to be a withering format of a bygone era. A lot has changed in Poland since 2016, when the Law and Justice party (PiS) took over.

The weaponisation of collective memory

The history of Polish-German relations is turbulent, and reaches further back than World War II. Prussia played a significant role in the downfall of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the late 18th century. The medieval Great War with Teutonic Knights became a vivid symbol in

modern Polish culture, metaphorically depicting the everlasting threat coming from the German neighbour. This topos, even if latent, is deeply embedded in Polish collective memory. Recognising this is crucial to understanding how easy it is to activate it, without any rational premises or legitimate reasons.

This anti-German sentiment has been weaponised several times by the spin doctors of PiS. In 2005, then-presidential candidate Donald Tusk was faced with an accusation that his grandfather had been a Wehrmacht soldier. It weighted heavily on his campaign, in favour of Tusk's rival, Lech Kaczyński. Back then, the architect of this allegation was fired from Kaczyński's campaign in disgrace.

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A decade later, under the twin brother Jarosław, he was appointed chairman of the Polish public broadcaster TVP. Today, not a day passes without the public media scolding Germany. 'Germany envious of Polish economic success'; 'Brussels, Berlin, and the opposition plotting against Poland'; 'The opposition and Germany want to punish Poland' – these are just a few examples of headlines demonising the government in Berlin.

Crude as it might seem, this witch-hunt illustrates the current government's need for enemies to consolidate support as well as to justify potential failures, especially in the international arena. This strategy seems to work well with some segments of voters.

An anti-German coalition in Europe?

Simultaneously, Jarosław Kaczyński is developing a different rhetoric for a more sophisticated audience. At the Warsaw Summit, a meeting of the European far right early in December, he presented his geopolitical framework, a grand narrative for the future of the European Union. He warned not only against a Europe weakened by 'political correctness' and European institutions founded on the illusion of a European demos and therefore lacking democratic legitimacy.

He also cautioned against contemporary Germany 'cancelling the historical memory of the 20th century' that once forced it to restrict its ambitions, and opening space for allegedly hegemonic aspirations of Berlin to subjugate the European Union by institutional means, namely by federalisation. Kaczyński even went as far as using the metaphor of the Fourth German Reich. Symptomatically, the AfD was not invited to this

meeting. Is Kaczynski plotting to build not only an illiberal but also anti-German coalition in Europe? In any case, reserve and distrust are the conditions Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the newly-appointed foreign minister Annalena Baerbock will have to deal with.

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At the same time, official visits to Poland took place in a superficially courteous atmosphere. During her first trip on 10 December, Annalena Baerbock was greeted by President Andrzej Duda and later hosted by her Polish counterpart, Zbigniew Rau. Even if polite, the latter's attitude was described by some commentators as 'condescending'. As a young woman representing a party almost exotic to the Polish political scene, it will always be twice as hard for Baerbock to be heard and taken seriously in conservative circles.

Yet, she put on a brave face and appeased her host by highlighting passages about the deep Polish-German friendship in the coalition agreement and stressing her scepticism towards Putin's Russia. Two days later, Chancellor Olaf Scholz met with the Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki. This time, it was a conversation on equal terms, without patronising. Yet this exchange echoed, or pronounced even more, the rifts between Berlin and Warsaw.

Contentious issues between Berlin and Warsaw

Both meetings showed there are a few points of contention weighting heavily on bilateral relations. First is the future of Nord Stream 2. Poland has long viewed it as not only a strategic threat to European energy security, but it also brought historical flashbacks of Germany and Russia making deals above the heads of states sandwiched in-between.

Today, the pipeline is even more controversial as the pressure exercised by Vladimir Putin on Ukraine increases. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy openly called it 'a dangerous geopolitical weapon'. The new German government will have to work quickly to find a sustainable long-term consensus regarding this project within the coalition and reassure its eastern neighbours.

Second is the management of expectations regarding the EU. For the current Polish government, there is neither understanding nor will to

answer the calls for restoring the rule of law. Moreover, further federalisation of the EU is exactly the opposite of what the current Polish government wants.

Let's hope that the current impasse won't affect people's hearts and that the work invested in reconciliation over decades will persist.

At the same time, Poland has recently emerged in a new role, protecting the external border of the EU against the ruthless weaponisation of migration flows by Belarusian president Alexander Lukashenko. Even if there is an opportunity for constructive cooperation in this field, it is evident that Berlin and Warsaw will be pulling Brussels in opposite directions.

Third is the playing of the history card by the Polish government. 76 years after World War II ended, it wants to create a War Losses Institute to pursue 'the [financial] balance of the German and Soviet occupation'. Such an institution is not only a tool of instrumentalising history for political goals but also a manifestation of the geopolitical imagination of the Polish national-conservatives. 'Lifting the country from its knees' is the guiding principle in the making of their foreign policy. Theatrical as this might sound, these claims will long taint Polish-German relations.

There are certainly further issues in the background that show the rising level of estrangement between Warsaw and Berlin, like the row over the status of Poles and the teaching of Polish language in Germany. Or diverging views on climate and energy policy, with the coal phase-out and plans for new nuclear power plants at their heart. It is to be expected that at the diplomatic level, Polish-German dialogue will remain cool and reserved. Neither trivial stories about personal ties with Poland nor new monuments will ever soften the hard line of PiS on Germany.

But in spite of all that, trade and economic exchange between two countries remains unharmed. Let's hope that the current impasse similarly won't affect people's hearts and that the work invested in reconciliation over decades will persist. It will be needed to rekindle this relationship with positive energy when the tables turn again someday in the future.



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