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Reparations and the crisis of Poland's foreign policy

The return of Poland's reparations debate reveals the ruling party's primitive approach to morality, history and sovereignty

As the conflict between Warsaw and Berlin has deepened, the issue of war reparations has been put back on the agenda by Poland's ruling PiS government. Influential party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski last year claimed that 'Germany owes Poland huge sums of money', and this month commissioned a study to calculate Poland's financial claims for Second World War losses.

The prospects of receiving any financial payments from Berlin are close to zero. In 1953 Warsaw followed the lead of the Western allies and the Soviet Union in officially relinquishing any claim to further reparations from Germany. Indeed, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Magierowski recently confirmed that Warsaw respects the binding character of this legal commitment, suggesting that the rationality of Kaczynski's move is questioned even within government circles.

Of course, the re-emergence of the reparations issue owes more to political than legal or economic considerations. Polish President Andrzej Duda (also of PiS) recently vetoed two proposals for controversial reforms of the judiciary, frustrating Kaczynski's aims to bring the courts under the control of the government and raising speculation of a split in the ruling camp. And Germany has always been PiS' popular scapegoat to distract voters' attention from such domestic troubles.

But 'operation reparations' represents more than just using foreign policy for domestic purposes. It also reveals how Poland's international relations have been infected by PiS' primitive approach to morality, history and sovereignty.

Morality

For PiS, the pursuit of 'moral victories' is fundamental. And there is no doubt that the Polish claim for reparations has a solid moral case – perhaps more so than any other country besides Israel and the former Soviet republics. The Nazi occupation of Poland resulted in the deaths of over 5.5 million Polish citizens (around half of whom were Jews), as well as the near-total destruction of Warsaw and many other cities. Poland only later gave up its claim to reparations under orders from Moscow, on whom Warsaw's communist government was completely dependent. For PiS this historical wrong needs to be righted at whatever cost, and it is ready to sacrifice foreign policy goals like good relations with a key neighbour or reputation and influence in the EU in order to achieve this moral victory.

Yet in reality this policy is not only unwise but also deeply *immoral*. As the Polish commentator Kazimierz Wóycicki recently noted, 'Even the greatest crime committed in the past cannot justify the lack of rationality and common sense today'. To blame and punish the second and third generation of Germans for atrocities committed over 70 years ago runs directly contrary to the ultimate goal of a moral foreign policy – that of peace and reconciliation between nations.

Warsaw's approach to this matter reflects Kaczynski's political thinking at large: by overhauling Poland's liberal-democratic institutions he is seeking to finally win the arguments he lost in the 1990s, when he opposed the country's liberal transformation. But by replaying the battles of the past – fighting alleged post-Communist networks and reversing education reforms introduced by predecessors – PiS is destroying the foundations of the state while claiming to restore moral sanity.

History

This moral fanaticism is accompanied by a refusal to acknowledge the complexity of history. And it is only the complexity of history which allows us to draw useful lessons for today's policy. The ending of the reparations regime in the 1950s was an indispensable step towards peace and integration in Europe. It reflected a fundamental change in the approach towards the defeated war enemy in the belief that it is better to turn the enemy into an ally than to keep him down. This shift prevented a repeat of the post-WWI economic humiliation of Germany which had contributed to the rise of Hitler, and helped make West Germany an economically viable state which was able to resist communism and later become the engine of European integration.

True, it was not Poland's choice to stay on the other side of the Iron Curtain and be excluded from those benefits. But political maturity requires acknowledging that history is a complex knot. Trying to simply cut it through is often neither possible nor advisable.

This inability to look beyond black and white interpretations of history is a dangerous and contagious disease. In Poland it affects not only Polish-German relations, but many other national discussions. We see it in the debate about Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Walesa, for example, whose short-lived contacts with the communist secret police in the early 70s are used by PiS to delegitimise his unquestionable merits in destroying the communist system. It is a sticking point in Poland's relations with Ukraine, too, with Warsaw denigrating Ukrainian national hero Stepan Bandera on account of his responsibility for crimes against Polish citizens.

Sovereignty

Finally, this anti-German campaign is also a symptom of the way Polish politics is becoming de-Europeanised. The 1990s ideal of 'alignment' with Western European values and economies has been replaced by PiS with the populist ideal of 'emancipation' from those erstwhile partners.

The Europeanisation of Poland was always inextricably linked with its relationship with Germany. It is thus no accident that PiS' trumpeting of Polish sovereignty has been accompanied by its demonising Berlin. The foundations of the German-Polish bilateral relationship are crumbling, and the dispute about reparations is eroding any sense of trust between the two capitals.

The reparations debacle may soon fizzle out if Kaczynski decides he has exhausted the domestic gains from the campaign. But the forces shaping Poland's politics are likely to stay as long as PiS remains in power, accelerating the demise of the country's foreign policy.

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