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# German-Polish relations: Points of agreement and collision.

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**Abstract:** *The outcome of the German elections in 2021 could significantly transform not only the country's domestic political relations, but also the political and economic status quo of the EU and Central and Eastern Europe. The present study aims to present the main factors in the dynamics of German-Polish relations, highlighting the most important points of agreement and difference, which will significantly impact the foreign policy of the two countries.*

**2021 is rightly referred to as *Supervahljahr*, with six provincial elections in one year and federal parliamentary elections in September, a confluence of elections that has not occurred for nearly 70 years without the reigning chancellor running for office. Developments in German domestic politics may also have an impact on the political and economic map of the Visegrád Group (V4), as well as Central and Eastern Europe in general. The present study seeks to present the current cornerstones of Polish-German relations, which will certainly influence the further development of political and economic power throughout the Central Europe region.**

Within German-Polish relations, one can note the juxtaposition between sometimes-turbulent political interactions and generally seamless economic cooperation. The question regarding their relationship is typically always to what extent the sides are willing to risk this prosperous economic collaboration to achieve specific domestic and foreign policy interests.

## Expected areas of lasting cooperation between Germany and Poland

### Germany-V4 relations

The mechanisms of German-Polish cooperation are good examples of Germany's foreign policy thinking and the concept of its cooperation with the Visegrád countries. Germany prefers to establish bilateral cooperation in relation to its V4 neighbors, not only because of the *divide et impera* approach on the German side, but „because of unequal interests and differences of opinions among the Group members,” toward the country, which makes “the V4 less important to Germany than the sum of its individual relationships”.<sup>i</sup>

The V4, in this relationship, mostly acts as a conciliatory forum, where there is no consensus among the members on all issues, even from an economic standpoint. The constituent nations are often competitors in the fight for foreign capital investments.

### Germany-Poland economic relations

Regardless of the development of current political relations, the traditionally stable economic cooperation between Poland and Germany is expected to continue.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the main impetuses of their prosperous economic relations is the geographic location of the two countries (their common border at a length of 472 km), which reliably expedites cross-border investment and export / import flows.

The Visegrád countries, as a bloc, represent Germany's most significant trading partner: in 2019, the V4 accounted for 12.5% of Germany's imports, twice the figure from China.<sup>iii</sup> Within the “European quartet”, Polish-German economic relations are the most significant: in 2020, Poland advanced two places from 2018, becoming Germany's 5<sup>th</sup> most important trading partner (6<sup>th</sup> in exports and 4<sup>th</sup> in imports)<sup>iv</sup>.

One can note the importance of economic cooperation between the two countries from the resilience of the Polish economy during two world crises. During the 2008 global economic crisis, Poland was the only country in the region to avoid economic recession,<sup>v</sup> in large part due to cross-border activity of German companies.<sup>vi</sup> In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, cross-border cooperation asserted an important role in interregional coordination between municipalities on both sides, including traffic

or both passengers and goods. Economically, Poland is expected to come out of the post-pandemic crisis with the smallest economic loss among all EU countries (the EU Commission forecasted a GDP of 4.6% for 2020 and growth of 4.3% for 2021), which is linked to close interregional economic cooperation with Germany.<sup>vii</sup>

### **Three Seas Initiative – field of actual cooperation and future competition**

The TSI project is a manifestation of mutually beneficial cooperation between the two countries, based alignment of interests. Germany „shares the overall objective of the initiative and sees that it has huge potential to create synergies and thus provide important added value to the region”<sup>viii</sup> with Poland, which considers the project a „strategic response to challenges of the post-COVID era” and a way to strengthen EU cohesion and enrich trans-Atlantic cooperation.”<sup>ix</sup>

### **Weimar Triangle**

The 30-year-old cooperation of these three nations began in 1991 on the basis of common interests: France and Germany sought new trading partners across Europe, while Poland, as a young democracy, wanted platforms for European reintegration. Soft power also occurred in the forms of “youth summits”, as well as cultural, artistic, historical, and civic engagement. Despite the cultural successes, the Triangle has become politically less relevant. On one hand, this is due to the 30-year-long natural diversification of European policy; on the other, it is a result of Poland’s opposition to current integration initiatives advanced by Germany and France.<sup>x</sup> Despite the political turbulence among the member states, in 2021 the three nations issues a statement praising the Triangle” opportunity „with a surprisingly wide scope, from EU relations with Russia and China to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.”<sup>xi</sup>

### **Mutual security perception – NATO membership**

For decades, Germany (the former West Germany a NATO member since 1955) and Poland (NATO member since 1999) have acted as committed members of the alliance, sharing the same security perceptions and views of NATO as the ultimate guarantee of Europe’s security. However, during the Trump administration, the dispute about equal burden-sharing among allies created tension between Germany and Poland. In 2019, former US President Donald Trump expressed criticism of “delinquent” members

(specifically Germany) by announcing a reduction of more than 9,000 U.S. troops in Germany, to 25,000, as a punitive measure in response to Germany's defense spending shortfall.<sup>xii</sup> In contrast, Poland proposed the establishment of a permanent US military base on Polish territory, due primarily to the increased Russian military threat.<sup>xiii</sup> Although the result of the 2020 US presidential elections may undermine the Polish proposal<sup>xiv</sup>, the competition between Germany and Poland within NATO will continue. Disagreements between Poland and Germany over their approach to US and NATO are at least as significant as their political conflicts in bilateral, transatlantic and EU issues.<sup>xv</sup>

## Points of difference

### Foreign policy toward Russia

One of the major foreign-policy differences between the two countries is the huge gap in attitudes toward Russia.

Poland advocates a strict sanctions policy, declaring Russia an aggressor and real security threat, heavily relying on NATO in its security policy approach. Germany's policy toward Russia is more nuanced: at the diplomatic level, it has repeatedly condemned Russia (for instance, the Navalny<sup>xvi</sup> and Skripal poisoning cases<sup>xvii</sup>, as well as the explosion in a Czech ammunition warehouse<sup>xviii</sup>), but these official statements typically constitute political expressions of opinion that do not harm German-Russian long-term economic cooperation. However, interdependence has shifted with the decline of the economic importance of the Russian market to Germany, a consequence of Russian economic stagnation. Meanwhile, Germany's regional cooperation with Central and East European countries has proven successful, as German-Czech trade volumes since 2018 have exceeded the German-Russian equivalents.<sup>xix</sup>

### Nord Stream II – secured gas supply to Europe or the new Molotov-Ribbentrop pact?<sup>xx</sup>

The most eye-catching manifestation of the countries' conflict of interests is their disagreement on Nord Stream 2. The question of the pipeline with a 55-billion-cubic-meter capacity may have an impact on the energy map of all Europe, extending far beyond the long-term bilateral relations between Germany and Poland.

About four-fifths of EU gas consumption (394 billion cubic meters) is imported, almost half of that from Russia (48% of total imported natural gas)<sup>xxi</sup>. Germany's annual gas consumption in 2020 was 86.5 billion cubic meters<sup>xxii</sup>, which makes the country the biggest net natural gas importer in the EU.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Germany's energy needs derive primarily from its strong industry<sup>xxiv</sup> (where natural gas is also used as a raw material), residential consumption demand is also strong<sup>xxv</sup>, which explains the country's need for supplementary gas supply from Norway<sup>xxvi</sup> and the Netherlands<sup>xxvii</sup> (where production has declined over the past year due to various extraction problems<sup>xxviii</sup>).

Germany has supported construction of Nord Stream 2 from the beginning. However, the turning point for vocal support of the pipeline came in response to sanctions imposed under the Trump administration. As a result of those sanctions, Germany acted more determined to show openly its interests in the pipeline, as well as its opposition to external influence on European affairs from Washington, calling the US sanction plan a blackmail attempt against Germany.<sup>xxix</sup> According to the German argument, the United States intended to use the conflict between Moscow and Kiev to support the interests of American energy companies, which could benefit from supplying LNG in place of Russia.<sup>xxx</sup>

Before the Ukrainian conflict in 2014, the idea of doubling the Nord Stream 1 output was a relevant topic. The project entailed a capital investment of about ten billion euros was financed in half through Gazprom and half through a Western European capital-acquisition scheme (including Shell, Wintershall, Engie, Uniper, and OMV)<sup>xxxi</sup>.

From the beginning, Poland has sought to block the implementation of the project from every angle, building its argument on several pillars:

The most frequent source of opposition is related to the security risk of the NS2 project: the concept of Nord Stream 2 is to establish a gas supply that completely bypasses Ukraine, which, according to Polish interpretation, would cause a major loss of revenue to the Ukrainian economy, destabilizing not only the country, but the region at large,<sup>xxxii</sup> thus creating a direct threat to Poland.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Further objections from the Poles include the excessive strengthening of Gazprom's strategic position in Europe, as the dominance of North-South gas supply routes will necessitate a weakening of East-

West gas supply, which would ultimately lead to increased vulnerability of the European gas market.<sup>xxxiv</sup>



1. Picture: Russia's gas-export route plan map, showing its intent to bypass Ukrainian transit <sup>xxxv</sup>

Another argument maintains that the construction of Nord Stream 2 would severely hamper expansion of the European LNG market,<sup>xxxvi</sup> a concern Washington also expressed.<sup>xxxvii</sup> As a response to energy diversification concerns caused by increased Russian gas exports to Europe, Berlin and Washington agreed on an LNG terminal in Brunsbüttel, the aim of which was exportation of Western-origin gas to Europe.<sup>xxxviii</sup> With this “gesture,” Germany met the demands of former US president Donald Trump and proved Germany was not an energy “captive” of Moscow. <sup>xxxix</sup>

In Poland, the issue of losing revenue from gas transit<sup>xl</sup> also plays an active role in the opposition to the German-Russian gas supply route: according to some views, Nord Stream 2 could replace the Jamal 1 pipeline<sup>xi</sup>, (built in the 1990s and operating with 30 billion cubic meters of capacity).

On July 2021, American and German representatives agreed on completion of Nord Stream 2,<sup>xlii</sup> and construction finished in August, 2021.<sup>xliii</sup> The next step will be German government approval<sup>xliiv</sup>: theoretically, this is possible as soon as the new government is formed, but, according to the official deadline, the decision may take until the summer of 2022.<sup>xliv</sup> The timeline and parameters of this operation are still undecided. The case of the Nord Stream 1 Opal pipeline might serve as an indicator of Polish-

German relations on the topic: due to the intervention of the European Court of Justice, the operation of the pipeline had been restricted.<sup>xlvi</sup>

In the light of the results of the German elections, it is even more questionable what legal construction and timing the German side intends to present: by taking a riskier path, it assumes the possibility of a Polish veto, or a softer model which ensures a relatively smooth commissioning. In terms of developments in German domestic politics, the CDU and CSU are expected to support the implementation of Nord Stream 2,<sup>xlvii</sup> while the Green Party will be less supportive of the project due to their energy policy ideas and Atlantic affiliation.<sup>xlviii</sup>

## Conclusion

The results of the German elections are also expected to mean a change in the previous status quo in many respects for German-Polish relations. Close economic cooperation will continue to provide an unchanging aspect of the relationship between the two countries. The two countries are also cooperating on a number of important projects at the European level, but the dynamics of the relationship are at least as much characterized by competition, as they represent the strongest economies both within and without the eurozone. Both countries voted in favour of the good German-Polish neighbourhood relations,<sup>xlix</sup> while tensions between the two countries over Nord Stream II and Russia will not ease anytime soon.



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