

EUROPEANISATION REVISITED: POLISH–GERMAN RELATIONS IN THE NEW ERA

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INTRODUCTION

Following the end of communism and the unification of Germany, German–Polish relations have been consistently improving, resulting in the enlargement of the EU and a massive increase in trade and people-to-people contact. The Polish–German border, once one of the most severely guarded frontiers in Europe, is no longer visible. People flow freely between both sides of what has become, in reality, a theoretical frontier, with the service sector on the Polish side often geared towards German customers and German supermarkets offering bilingual displays. Until 2015/2016, the perceptions of this relationship were constantly improving both in Germany and Poland. ‘Polish–German reconciliation is a miracle,’ once famously declared Poland’s former foreign minister Bronisław Geremek, whose father perished in Auschwitz (Wielński, 2018).

However, since the socially conservative and often Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) party won the elections in Poland in autumn 2015, the honeymoon period in Polish–German relations ended. The party stayed in power for two terms, eventually losing its majority in the election in October 2023. There is no doubt that this eight-year period was challenging for the relationship. As opposed to other governments after 1989, Law and Justice did not prioritise relations with Berlin and actively worked to balance against what it considered a Franco–German domination in the EU. The points of contention included relations with Russia, migration and climate policies, and very divergent visions of European integration. Moreover, historical wounds were opened, with Warsaw threatening to sue Germany for wartime

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reparations. There was also a domestic incompatibility, with Poland departing from the liberal-democratic model, undermining its Constitutional Court and attacking the independence of the judiciary, all of which have been sacrosanct in the Federal Republic since its creation.

In the past, much of the progress made in Polish–German relations has been explained by the impact of European integration. Various scholars, this one included, were arguing that the process of Europeanisation has had a consensus-building impact on Polish–German relations in a way comparable to Franco–West German relations during and after the Cold War (Opłowska, 2017; Szwed, 2019; Zaborowski, 2004). There can be a valid question, however, whether the mitigating impact of European integration has not withered away with Poland becoming a full member of the EU and claiming, since, the position of a stakeholder in the process. Are the tensions in Warsaw–Berlin relations an outcome of this change of status and a completion of the process that undoubtedly had a unifying impact on one of the most important relationships in Europe?

It is argued here that, whilst the importance of the process of Europeanisation has been weakened for Poland's domestic transition, it continues nonetheless to play a vital role in relations between Warsaw and Berlin. In short, it is argued here that Polish–German relations, whilst undoubtedly undergoing a tumultuous time during the 2015–2023 period, would have been far more problematic in the absence of the larger European framework, which continues to push both capitals towards co-operation.

EUROPEANISATION AND INTER-STATE RELATIONS

The notion of *Europeanisation* has usually been applied to describe the impact of the EU on domestic norms, processes and policies within Member States and candidate states (Cowles, Caporaso and Risse-Kappen, 2001). Most of this process, referred to in literature, underlines the top-down dynamic whereby the norms produced at the EU level have impacted domestic regulations of Member States. The literature also acknowledges that this process may work in both directions, with Member States also influencing developments at the EU level (Bulmer and Paterson, 1987). In other words, *Europeanisation* is a two-way process, which – like the Monetary Union – originates from a small circle of member states, then takes the shape of a policy proposal at the EU level and becomes a policy only when accepted by all or a majority of Member States. However, once it becomes an EU policy, Brussels guards its implementation and has disciplinary instruments at its disposal, which it may use against a disobeying government.

The other interpretation of *Europeanisation* is largely normative, and it concerns transitions to democracy in the Mediterranean states and in the former communist states. In this case, the notion of *Europeanisation* means to democratise and reform in a way that emulates West European liberal democracies. This aspiration was then reinforced by a goal of joining the EC/EU. In the case of ex-communist countries, Europeanisation also meant direct conditionality in the shape of the so-called Copenhagen Criteria, which the aspiring member states had to meet to enter the accession negotiations (Croft *et al.*, 1999). Then, once these aspiring members became candidate states and entered into membership negotiations, they had to introduce a thorough set of domestic reforms, which were in large part scripted in Brussels. This was the phase of the accession process during which the impact of the EU on domestic arrangements in candidate states was most direct and followed the top-down dynamic. However, it is important to stress that at the outset of this process was a sovereign will of the aspiring member states to ‘return to Europe’, as famously claimed by former Czech President Václav Havel (Havel, 1990).

In what way, therefore, does the process of Europeanisation stretch to foreign policy and relations between Member States or candidates and Member States? Conditionality, either in the form of the Copenhagen Criteria or membership negotiations, has played some role here. The Copenhagen Criteria did not directly address foreign policy issues, although they underlined ‘stability of democratic institutions’ and respect for the ‘protection of national minorities’. Arguably, both these elements have indirect implications for foreign policy, especially in Central Europe. A state that remains belligerent towards its neighbour and is only just transitioning to democracy would find it harder to complete its transition successfully. National minorities in Central Europe are mostly constituted by ethnic groups originating from, or linked to, neighbouring nations, such as the Germans in Poland or the Hungarians in Slovakia and Romania. Hence, protecting the rights of national minorities in this part of Europe serves to improve relations with the neighbours.

As for the actual membership negotiations, one of the chapters that proved the easiest for the candidates concerned the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). During negotiations, the candidates had to demonstrate that they aligned with EU statements on foreign policy matters. Given the mostly declaratory state of the CFSP, which is often devoid of actionable policies, the candidates’ compliance with EU positions was not difficult, nor was it particularly consequential. Hence, the actual technical process of membership negotiations had lesser impact on shaping the foreign policies of the candidates. The Copenhagen Criteria, as discussed above, had more impact on promoting co-operation in the region than the actual membership negotiations.

However, what mattered most was the informal context of European integration as a peace-building project. Right from its outset, European integration was launched to promote peace amongst former adversaries – between France and Germany – and, of course, to build a bloc capable of effective deterrence against the Soviet Union. Hence, the project started with placing under supranational oversight the coal and steel industries of the original six Member States. At the time (1952), coal and steel were essential for building militaries and waging wars. Placing these industrial sectors under supranational supervision was practically excluding the possibility of a war between participating member states, which was intentional for the founding fathers (Monet, 2015, pp. 335–336).

The subsequent progress of European integration, towards the customs union, the single market, and eventually monetary union, tied the economies of the participating states progressively further, making the prospect of military conflict between them unthinkable and practically impossible. The core of European integration has always been, and remains, the Franco–German relationship. It is a known factor, though nowhere codified, that no major policy initiative can emerge in the EU if it is not accepted and usually pre-agreed within the Franco–German tandem.

The current level of co-operation between France and Germany has been built over decades, during which it has been reinforced by various institutional formats, regular government-to-government meetings, people-to-people contacts, and close co-operation between businesses at levels unprecedented anywhere else in Europe. Over the decades, there has emerged a strong foundation for the relationship, which has proven resistant to various crises and even declared goals of loosening it up by newly elected leaderships, both in France and in Germany. Berlin and Paris may disagree and argue, but somehow, they always end up patching up differences and moving on (Cole, 2001; Sutton, 2007).

There are several reasons why this relationship continues to remain resilient despite various setbacks. The three most essential are: the existence of a dense historical context that makes key political forces on both sides prioritise the well-being of this relationship; secondly, a net of bilateral governmental and non-governmental institutions coupled with a strong economic dimension; and thirdly, the overarching context of European integration, which, as argued here, has all the trappings of an *Alliance* encouraging strategic proximity. All three elements are interlinked, but arguably, there would be no rapprochement, and consequently no institutional framework in this relationship, without the context of European integration. It is therefore argued here that the Franco–German relationship represents a benchmark case of Europeanisation of interstate relations (Zaborowski, 2004). The term is used here both in the institutional sense – as a reference to the impact of the context of European integration on relations between Member States – and predominantly in the normative sense – to refer to the informal context of the EU as a peace-building project.

The process of rapprochement between unified Germany and Poland, launched after 1989, was very consciously built on the experience established between France and West Germany during the Cold War (Pflüger, 1996; Rothacher, 2004). Whilst France is Germany's western neighbour, Poland is its main eastern neighbour. As in the Franco–German case, the legacy of the past is tragic, to say the least. European integration enabled Franco–West German rapprochement after the end of the Second World War. There was a strong expectation that co-operation in the EU context would promote rapprochement between Germany and its eastern neighbour after the end of the Cold War. In short, there was an expectation that what Europeanisation did to the Franco–German relationship would be replicated between Poland and Germany (Pflüger, 1996).

There is no doubt that the context of European integration has played a major role in re-fashioning Polish–German relations after the end of the Cold War. However, whilst promoting EU enlargement was a very powerful project in which the interests of Warsaw and Berlin met, there has always been uncertainty as to whether the rapprochement would be maintained once the enlargement was completed. Indeed, following Poland's accession to the EU in May 2004, some difficult bilateral issues came into prominence. Perhaps most importantly, Poland and Germany have deeply disagreed about the Nord Stream project: a gas pipeline connecting Russia with Germany and bypassing Poland and the Baltic States. There have been other difficult issues resurfacing in subsequent years that have complicated this bilateral relationship, including those of a strictly historical nature, such as the possible re-opening of the wartime reparations issue.

The relationship has been particularly challenged since the socially conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) won elections in Poland in autumn 2015. It is a well-known factor that the founder and leader of the party, Jarosław Kaczyński, harbours deep anti-German sentiments, many of which were reflected in the positions of the PiS government between 2015 and 2023 (Wielński, 2018). It is therefore appropriate to assess the impact of Europeanisation on the relationship before 2015 and after.

EUROPEANISATION AND POLISH–GERMAN RELATIONS 1989–2015

Poland's transition to democracy was determined by geopolitical factors. In other words, no transition would have been possible as long as the Cold War persisted, and the Soviet Union maintained its domination in Central Europe. All attempts at democratisation within the Soviet bloc were immediately crushed by force, either by Soviet or Warsaw Pact interventions (Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968), or by domestic security services answerable to Moscow (Poland 1981). Poland's geopolitical position

was particularly precarious. Not only was Poland run by a communist dictatorship and subverted to the Soviet Union, but it was also locked in a territorial conflict with the Federal Republic of Germany, which made Poland objectively dependent on Soviet security guarantees.

Until 1970, the Bonn Republic maintained the legality of the 1937 borders and did not accept the post-war settlement, as determined by the Great Powers at the Potsdam Conference in August 1945, which established a provisional Polish–German border along the line delimited by the rivers Odra and Nysa (United States Department of State, 1960). Whilst the border was eventually recognised by the government of Willy Brandt in 1970, the Bonn Republic concluded the treaty only in its own name, not in the name of the German successor state. Hence, a question mark over the border remained and was, in fact, re-opened with the unification of Germany (Rotfeld and Stützle, 1998).

However, the communist period was not entirely wasted in this respect, and the groundwork for rapprochement in Polish–German relations was laid before 1989. In the mid-1960s, the Polish Catholic Episcopate expressed regret for the inhumane nature of the expulsion of ethnic Germans from the areas annexed by Poland following the Potsdam Agreement (Suchocka, 1996). With Willy Brandt becoming Federal Chancellor in 1969, the Bonn Republic launched its *Ostpolitik*, which, as far as relations with Warsaw were concerned, resulted in the establishment of diplomatic relations, recognition of the border, the opening of trade between both states, and even the introduction of elements of co-operation in forming school curriculums (Bingen, 1997). So, the change was profound, although Polish communist propaganda played it down and maintained that Poland remained vulnerable vis-à-vis Germany, and that the alliance with the Soviet Union was in the nation's interest (Puślecki, 1996).

When Poland launched its transition to democracy and a market economy in 1989, the context of relations with Germany was therefore complex and difficult, but no longer dominated exclusively by sheer animosity. The subsequent events brought both nations closer together and led to the emergence of what has been coined 'the community of interests' – a process considerably determined by the existence of the context of European integration (Barcz, 2016) in this relationship. The grounds for rapprochement were already in place, but there were numerous stumbling blocks along the way, including sceptical populations, party politics, and an unstable international context.

Following the elections on 4 June 1989, Poland formed the first non-communist government in the Soviet bloc. The new Prime Minister, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, and his Foreign Minister, Krzysztof Skubiszewski, both had extensive links with the German elites, and both were convinced that Poland would never reconnect with the West as long as Germany remained divided (Barcz, 2016). This was the first essential aspect

of the congruence of German and Polish interests. The Polish experiment with the transition to democracy was unlikely to succeed if Germany remained divided. At the same time, the unification of Germany was conditioned on the collapse of the Soviet bloc, which in no small part was precipitated by the events in Poland, representing the first falling domino block, with others – including East Germans – to follow the Polish example.

However, as so often happens, there was a disparity in this regard between the elites' strategic clarity of the elites and broader public sentiment. Although some parts of the new Polish Solidarity elites understood the rationale for German unification, the notion caused deep unease amongst the Polish population at large. As a nation that in the past was occupied and dominated by Prussia and then Germany, the Poles had strong reservations about the looming prospect of a larger and more powerful German state (Ćwiek-Karpowicz, 2005).

Yet the new elites went against this public mood, and the transition government of Tadeusz Mazowiecki publicly supported the goal of German unification ahead of a number of Western states, including Great Britain and France (Dudek, 2016, pp. 67–75). Mazowiecki's government was now expecting that, in exchange for its endorsement of the goal of unification, Germany would confirm the 1970 border treaty as final and binding for the new unified Germany. This expectation, however, was not met by Bonn, which delayed a final recognition of the border, mostly due to domestic considerations (Teltschik, 1992). The outcome of this re-opened conflict was ambivalent. Mazowiecki failed to secure a legally binding connection between the recognition of the border and unification prior to 3 October 1990, when the two German states came together. Yet, under intense international pressure, the German Bundestag adopted a resolution recognising the border as a political act ahead of unification in June 1990. The border was then legally recognised in a treaty signed a little over a month after unification, on 14 November 1990 (Rzeczpospolita Polska, 1992b).

Following this imperfect relaunch, within a year of unification, Berlin and Warsaw embarked on a thorough upgrade of the relationship's institutional framework. This required a new treaty, with the Franco–German Élysée Treaty of 1963 serving as the point of reference. Consequently, a number of the treaty's provisions – such as intergovernmental consultations, reconciliation, twinning programmes, and youth exchange – were all copied from the Franco–German model. Importantly, the treaty also included Germany's commitment to support Poland's European integration (Rzeczpospolita Polska, 1992a). This, in reality, meant that Germany was taking upon itself the role of acting as Poland's advocate in the EU, most of which was predominantly sceptical of opening up to the nations from the former Soviet bloc.

The Polish–German treaty was signed in June 1991. In December of the same year, Poland entered into the Europe Association Agreement. Two years after the treaty

was signed, in June 1993 in Copenhagen, the European Council adopted a set of criteria (known since then as the Copenhagen Criteria) for prospective members from ex-communist Europe who wished to start negotiations leading to membership. The road to EU enlargement was, in effect, opened. There were, naturally, many factors that made EU accession possible for the ex-communist nations, but the Polish–German rapprochement was undoubtedly one of them – and probably the most powerful one. Ever since Poland and Germany completed their bilateral treaty, all successive German governments consistently advocated in favour of the process generally, and specifically in favour of Poland's EU application (Hofhansel, 2001).

Upon Poland joining the EU in 2004, the European context evolved and started to play a different role. Poland was no longer in the position of an applicant country relying on the support of a powerful neighbour. With the enlargement coming through, the relationship lost a powerful common project, where the interests were mutually reinforcing. In addition, in 2005, the Law and Justice party (PiS: *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość*) unexpectedly won the election in Poland and formed a coalition with two Eurosceptic parties – the agrarian Self-Defence movement (*Samoobrona*) and the far-right League of Polish Families (LPR: *Liga Polskich Rodzin*).

This first government led by Law and Justice survived only two years, and following early elections in 2007, it was replaced by a pro-European coalition of Civic Platform (PO: *Platforma Obywatelska*) and the Polish People's Party (PSL: *Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe*). However, although the first PiS-led government was short-lived, it already indicated that PiS was challenging some foundations of Poland's foreign policy, particularly those concerning the attitude towards European integration and closer relations with Germany (Dudek, 2016, pp. 563–72). In other words, as far as PiS's ideological platform was concerned, there was no commitment to the Europeanisation of Polish–German relations; instead, there was the use of anti-German rhetoric for electoral purposes. As a result, the attitude towards Europeanisation became one of the key cleavages dividing Polish politics. At the same time, in Germany, the attitude towards Poland remained a matter of political consensus, though not a matter of priority in Berlin's foreign policy.

These internal divisions in Poland deepened during the eight years of the PO–PSL government between 2007 and 2015. The pro-European coalition pursued a foreign policy oriented towards Poland joining the inner circle of the EU, which required close co-operation with Germany and France. Hence, Poland played a constructive role during the Euro crisis in 2010 and during the migration crisis of 2015. At the same time, Warsaw successfully pushed for the remodelling of EU eastern policy and the tightening of relations with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia – all of which were offered Association Agreements and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs). Warsaw's ambitions and its growing influence in shaping the EU's foreign

policy agenda, whilst seen as constructive, also caused some tensions in its relationship with Berlin. During these years, the German approach towards EU eastern policy prioritised Russia (Malinowski, 2015).

Following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the EU adopted some sanctions against Russia, but Germany continued with the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline connecting Russia and Germany under the Baltic Sea, bypassing Poland and the Baltic States. Naturally, the project was opposed by Poland and the Baltic States, but also by the United States. Initially, the EU's approach towards the Ukraine crisis of 2013–2014 was led by the trio of Poland–Germany–France, but then, upon Russian insistence, Poland was dropped from the trio and did not become a part of the Minsk Agreement. However, despite these occasional disagreements, the spirit of co-operation dominated in Polish–German relations until the elections in 2015.

Assessment: Close neighbours, distant allies

Polish–German relations were redefined during the post-Cold War period, in considerable part thanks to the impact of European integration. Securing Poland's EU membership became a common project of both Warsaw and Berlin. For Poland, it meant modernisation, stability and security; for Germany, it massively enhanced the predictability of its immediate neighbourhood and brought an end to its precarious status as a front-line state. The interests of both states were not just compatible but mutually reinforcing.

Securing Poland's EU membership in 2004 did not lead to the end of co-operation but rather moved it to another level. With Poland now assuming the role of frontline state, Warsaw took upon itself the role of co-creator of the EU Eastern policy. In this context, the relationship with Berlin was not unproblematic due to divergent foreign policy priorities (Malinowski, 2015). However, at the same time, Warsaw worked with Berlin on strengthening EU engagement in the East, most prominently via the Eastern Partnership initiative and offering Association Agreements to Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova.

Due to its economic resilience and its status as the only EU Member State not to enter recession during the 2008 global economic crisis, Poland started to be perceived in Berlin as an asset rather than a burden. Economic co-operation began its dynamic expansion during this period. Perception of Germany improved in Poland as well. Yet some real issues remained unaddressed. Warsaw and Berlin had fundamentally different views on Russia, with serious policy implications, including the notorious construction of Nord Stream 2, which went ahead even after the Russian annexation of Crimea. This, in effect, meant that although Poland and Germany shared their alliances, the

divergence of their strategic perspectives made them distant allies. In addition, the attitude towards Germany started to divide Poland's political scene during this period, with the Eurosceptic Law and Justice party playing on deep-rooted anti-German sentiments.

RELATIONS 2015–2023: THE ANTI-GERMAN COURSE IN WARSAW

In autumn 2015, Poland's presidential and parliamentary elections were won by Law and Justice (PiS), which immediately moved to reformulate Poland's relations with the EU and Germany in particular. In his first address outlining foreign policy priorities, the new Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski broke with the post-1989 tradition of naming Germany Poland's privileged partner (Waszczykowski, 2016). That role went to the United Kingdom, which was just embarking on Brexit and was Poland's relatively distant sixth trade partner, as opposed to Germany, which had consistently remained the first partner since 1989. Meanwhile, the new President, Andrzej Duda, launched a regional initiative – the Three Seas Initiative – which consisted of a host of Central European states (president.pl, 2017). The purpose of the format was manifestly to strengthen regional co-operation, but also to offset the perceived German influence in the region. The objective of the former governments to join the inner core of the EU was abandoned. Instead, energy was invested in redefining European integration along national lines, highlighting the Gaullist discourse of the 'Europe of nation states'.

In this context, Germany was perceived as the key defender of the 'Brussels consensus', alleged to be instrumentalising European integration to pursue its national interest to the detriment of Central European states like Poland. As such, as far as declaratory foreign policy was concerned, Germany was no longer perceived as a close partner but as a challenge or even a threat, the influence of which needed to be resisted. This was also reflected in the domestic political context in Poland. Anti-German sentiments were in fact promoted by government-friendly media. The state-owned public television and radio consistently addressed foreign policy through anti-German lenses. Opposition leaders were portrayed as serving some unidentified but malicious 'German interest'. The mixed background of Donald Tusk – the former Prime Minister and the President of the European Council – whose family is of the Kashubian minority, was used to allege that he served German interests and was not a real Pole (Tilles, 2022).

With the sceptical attitude towards European integration and the openly anti-German line of Warsaw, there was a tangible risk that the Europeanisation process would go into reverse. This was, however, only partially true. Certainly, there was no warmth or even a pretence of strategic closeness in the relationship. The intergovernmental conferences whereby both governments met on an annual basis were suspended, as were the meetings of the Weimar Triangle, with some minor exceptions. Grand

gestures of reconciliation were largely absent from the relationship during this eight-year period. On the other hand, there was a continuation of daily co-operation in all major areas including political, security and economic. In all of those fields, the European context continued to have a gelling impact on the frail relationship (Nikel, 2023).

For example, following the European elections in 2019, PiS decided to throw its support behind the candidate of the European People's Party, Ursula von der Leyen, a former German defence minister, for the President of the Commission. In the European Parliament, PiS belongs to the Eurosceptic faction of European Conservatives and Reformists, which was too small to bid for crucial positions in the Parliament but large enough to influence some key decisions, as was the case in this instance. PiS's support for von der Leyen was motivated mostly by its objection to the centre-left's candidate, Frans Timmermans, who, as Vice-President of the Commission, was seen as the main architect of censoring Poland over violations of the rule of law and judicial independence. Yet, with support for von der Leyen being uncertain (a majority of only nine votes), the 26 votes she received from PiS proved decisive. In exchange, von der Leyen nominated a weak Polish candidate for the powerful agriculture portfolio, which was of major importance for PiS for domestic reasons. In subsequent years, PiS was often overtly critical of von der Leyen, accusing her, amongst other things, of 'serving the German agenda'; yet this does not change the fact that without PiS's support, she would not have been elected.

Unlike most of PiS, President Andrzej Duda avoided playing the anti-German card, even cultivating a decent relationship with the German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier. This had a significant impact on the shape of the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), which was eventually portrayed as a pragmatic format, devoid of anti-German motivation and focused on promoting energy and transport interconnectedness in Central Europe. Although the anti-German motivations were clearly present in the initial 3SI concept, they were subsequently eliminated, especially from official communication.

On the other hand, on the domestic front, PiS was using considerable resources to stir historical debates portraying Germany as a threat and historical enemy, as evident in the attempt to reopen the wartime reparations issue. Under the PiS government, a special committee was formed under the leadership of MP Arkadiusz Mularczyk, who subsequently became a deputy foreign minister, to estimate wartime damages inflicted by Nazi Germany on Poland. In September 2022, the report was publicly presented at the Royal Castle in Warsaw. The report estimated the damages at 1.32 trillion US dollars (Sejm.gov.pl, 2022). In October 2022, the German Foreign Minister, Annalena Baerbock, whilst paying an official visit to Warsaw, was presented with a diplomatic note inviting Berlin to begin negotiations on the matter. In January 2023, Berlin responded, expressing regret for the damages inflicted on Poland but denying the possibility of opening negotiations on reparations. Germany's response rested on two essential arguments.

Firstly, that Poland itself renounced reparations in 1953. Secondly, Berlin claimed that all legal issues pertaining to Germany's international obligations were addressed during the 1990 unification process under the 2+4 formula (Money.pl, 2023).

Europeanisation despite the crisis?

There is no doubt that during the 2015–2023 period, Warsaw's foreign policy took an anti-German turn and was actively working against Europeanisation. Yet in many respects, despite some official frostiness, the relationship between Warsaw and Berlin remained workable and in some areas even became closer. As argued here, *Europeanisation* requires three elements: (a) strong historical context combined with a drive towards reconciliation, (b) economic closeness and (c) strategic proximity.

As already indicated, the Polish government was using the historical context to open historical wounds and increase negative perceptions of Germany in Poland. In doing this, the government was successful in solidifying its core electorate around anti-German rhetoric, but unsuccessful in reaching groups that did not share the government's outlook. In fact, a positive perception of Germany strengthened among groups critical of the government, whilst it deteriorated further among the government's supporters (Kucharczyk and Łada, 2023). In this way, the attitude towards Germany became one of the key organising principles of political cleavage in Poland.

This dynamic was not reflected in Germany, where attitudes towards Poland remained mixed but not politicised. What dominated in Germany was a generally positive outlook (although somewhat worsened); but most significantly, the relationship with Poland did not excite German public opinion, with a very high proportion of the population (Kucharczyk and Łada, 2023) being uninterested and not having an opinion. This last feature suggests a low level of socialisation in the relationship. On the other hand, as far as elite perception is concerned, there is no doubt that the German government applied strategic patience in response to the anti-German rhetoric emanating from Warsaw. The institutional net of the relationship, which included several foundations and youth exchange programmes, went largely unaffected. With some exceptions, Berlin also refrained from criticising Warsaw over its rule of law violations. German public diplomacy dedicated significant resources to maintaining, or even establishing, dialogue with Polish research institutions, which at the time were dominated by nominees of the anti-German government.

The outcome of these efforts was mixed. Although the Polish government dedicated attention and resources to stir up anti-German sentiments, no significant change of attitudes took place as far as general perception is concerned. Importantly, however, the attitude towards Germany became one of the key factors dividing Polish politics. In Germany, the positive attitude towards Poland remained driven by elite consensus, with a considerable part of public opinion being oblivious to the process. Overall, in

the societal sphere, during the eight years of the anti-German administration in Poland, the relationship plateaued, but it did not experience a tectonic deterioration, despite massive efforts of the government in Poland.

Whilst the years 2015–2023 were ambivalent in the societal sphere of the relationship, its economic dimension acquired new dynamism. Trade between Poland and Germany continued to grow dynamically, reaching 167 billion euro in 2022 (Serwis Rzeczpospolitej Polskiej, 2023). For Poland, Germany steadily remained its number one economic partner, with exports accounting for 28% and imports around 20%. Meanwhile, between 2022–2023, Poland became one of the biggest trade partners for Germany – fifth in the world and third or second in the EU (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2023). Since 2020, Poland overtook the UK and then Italy, and in 2021 the Polish export market was even bigger for Germany than the French market. The trade dynamic remained clearly upward, growing by 19% between 2021–2022. Also, the relationship avoided asymmetry, with no major surplus or deficit on either side during this period. Whilst a marginal market in the 1990s, Poland has emerged as one of the closest and most important markets for Germany, with its trade volume growing by a factor of 15 between 1991 and 2023.

Nor did the difficult political climate affect investment decisions. German companies remained the leading source of direct investment in Poland, investing assets worth 60 billion euro, with estimated annual sales reaching 90 billion euro in 2018, which constituted 19% of all sales produced by foreign investors (IGCC, 2020). Meanwhile, Germany became a top destination for emerging Polish direct investment, with its assets estimated at 6 billion euro (Penke, 2021), and the largest state-owned company, Orlen, choosing Germany as its top investment market.

Finally, there is the question of strategic proximity. PiS always claimed that there was none in the relationship with Berlin. According to PiS, Germany has been historically bent on dominating Poland and the rest of Central Europe. Moreover, PiS acolytes have claimed that Berlin dominates not just Central Europe but the entire EU, which serves as a vehicle for the exercise of German power (Nienaltowski, 2023). What follows from this is a belief that although Germany no longer represents a threat in a conventional sense, its intentions towards Poland and the rest of the region remain predatory in nature – representing continuity with its authoritarian past. In this interpretation, which is widespread within PiS, Germany treats Poland not as a partner but as a neighbour to exploit and dominate. In fact, the key architect of PiS's foreign policy doctrine, Professor Krasnodębski, went as far as to claim that the threat to Poland's sovereignty was greater from the West (implying Germany) than from war-waging Russia (Czermiński, 2022).

As mentioned here earlier, Poland's pro-European camp has not shared this perspective, believing essentially that democratisation, the end of the Cold War and especially European integration have fundamentally changed the nature of this relationship, with both nations being like-minded allies.

However, whilst the perceptions of Germany's intentions towards Poland have polarised both sides of the political divide, there was a consensus and unanimous criticism of the German approach towards Russia and the EU's Eastern policy. The continuation of the construction of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline after the annexation of Crimea was universally criticised by both the Polish government and the opposition, as was the German government's policy towards the Minsk Agreement and its continuing prioritisation of Russia to the detriment of Ukraine in its Eastern policy. It is clear that on this issue, which is of fundamental importance for Poland, Warsaw and Berlin strategically diverged. Until quite recently, for Germany, Russia was a potential partner and a land of numerous economic opportunities. For Poland, Russia was a belligerent power which would take any opportunity to reclaim its superpower status and expand its influence and territory westwards.

This former dichotomy of strategic perspectives on Russia has substantially eased in response to the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 22 February 2022. The Russian aggression, its blatant violation of international law, and its war crimes have shocked German public opinion and led to a major change in Berlin's approach towards Russia, as exemplified by the *Zeitenwende* policy announced by Chancellor Scholz (Bundesregierung, 2022). Bilateral defence co-operation was also boosted. For example, following the incident of a stray Ukrainian missile landing on Polish territory and killing two civilians, Germany stationed three Patriot batteries and 300 troops in eastern Poland until the end of 2023 (Reuters, 2023). Germany also became a main provider of security to Lithuania, where it stations a brigade on a permanent basis, which is directly linked to Poland's own defence plans.

With Germany cancelling Nord Stream 2, endorsing subsequent rounds of sanctions on Russia, and becoming a key aid donor for Ukraine, it could be expected that the former dichotomy would give way to strategic congruence in Warsaw's and Berlin's approaches to Eastern policy. As long as PiS remained in power in Poland (until 15 October 2023), the narrative on this issue remained, however, negative. Prime Minister Morawiecki continued to criticise Germany for not doing enough to help Ukraine, even accusing it of creating the situation in the first place. However, whatever PiS's narrative on this issue, there is no doubt that *Zeitenwende* has initiated a process of convergence between German and Polish strategic perspectives, effectively shortening the distance that previously existed between these allies.

During the eight years of PiS government, Poland was ruled by an essentially anti-German party, which used anti-German rhetoric to solidify its domestic support. There is no doubt that the relationship was affected – however, surprisingly, much less than might seem logical under the circumstances. Public opinion in both countries did not change in a fundamental way, economic co-operation, if anything, intensified, and strategic congruence gained new footing in response to the clear manifestation of the Russian threat. This begs the question of why the relationship was so little affected during this eight-year period, despite one party actively pushing towards a full-blown

crisis. It is argued here that the key factor which continued to exert a moderating influence on both parties was the strategic framework of European integration.

CONCLUSION: ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE EUROPEAN FRAMEWORK

In what way did the European framework have an impact on the relationship? Poland and Germany have been not just partners but allies. In addition, the status of this relationship is extraordinary for both countries. For Germany, Poland represents the largest and most important ally in the East. Once a source of instability and various challenges, since it joined the EU Poland, though on occasion difficult, is now Germany's predictable neighbour. These arguments have been internalised in Berlin to the point whereby maintaining 'good neighbourly' relations became a dogma of German foreign policy (Nikel, 2023). Clearly, being faced with an anti-German government in Warsaw often caused irritation in Berlin, but rather than play tit-for-tat, Berlin chose 'strategic patience' in its approach to Warsaw between 2015 and 2023. As for Warsaw, the attitude towards Germany has divided the political scene. Yet even PiS tended to limit the use of its anti-German rhetoric to the domestic ground whilst maintaining co-operation in the wider EU framework.

The success of German-Polish economic co-operation since the end of the Cold War is beyond dispute. Germany maintained its position as Poland's most important trade partner and, meanwhile, Poland has become one of the most important partners for Germany. Since Poland joined the EU in 2004, the existence of the EU regulatory framework, which has become common for both states, has meant that businesses have operated across the border, taking full advantage of the single market with dynamic impact on cross-national trade. The same goes for investment. Ironically, the pinnacle of this process took place when Poland was ruled by an anti-German party. This, in fact, is another demonstration that politics has limited impact on the economy, especially in the Europeanised context.

As far as further research is concerned, it is suggested here that to fully grasp the impact of Europeanisation on inter-state relations, it is essential to treat the EU as an alliance. Allies are encouraged to work together, minimise their differences, and present a united front to the external world. France and West Germany launched the project of European integration to avoid another war against each other and to protect themselves effectively against the Soviet threat. As argued here, the security rationale has also been essential in Polish–German relations. The outbreak of the war in Ukraine additionally incentivised both Warsaw and Berlin to bury their differences and work together in confronting humanitarian crises and co-operating on security. As far as security and defence are concerned, there is no doubt that Poland and Germany became closer allies even during the 2015–2023 period.

Admittedly, it may seem counterintuitive to look at the EU as an alliance. Throughout the decades of its existence, the key mission of the EU has been regulatory and economic,

whilst NATO remained Europe's primary security alliance. Yet the context of the EU is intensely geopolitical and security-related. Europe's alliance system is simply multi-faceted, with NATO and the EU performing their respective roles but being essentially different faces of the same Western alliance, underpinned by commitment to the same Western values and set up for complementary purposes.

It is therefore posited here that the EU should be seen and addressed as an alliance, and the link between Europeanisation and inter-state relations can be examined with traditional international relations approaches. However, it is also true that the EU is a very specific alliance – one that is far deeper and more integrated than is the case with traditional security formats, such as NATO. This suggests that further work on Europeanisation's impact on inter-state relations should apply a hybrid conceptual framework composed of elements of traditional international relations approaches, which are typically applied to alliances, along with elements of institutional theories, which allow us to analyse the workings of the EU as a tightly integrated organisation, capable of affecting its Member States and their foreign policies.

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EUROPEANISATION REVISITED: POLISH–GERMAN RELATIONS IN THE NEW ERA

Abstract

Following Germany's unification and the end of communism, Polish–German relations experienced remarkable improvement, transforming from a heavily guarded frontier into a practically invisible border. This transformation facilitated EU enlargement, increased trade, and enhanced people-to-people contact, with Polish services catering to German customers, and German supermarkets offering bilingual displays. Until 2015–2016, perceptions of this relationship consistently improved in both countries, with Poland's former foreign minister Bronisław Geremek famously calling Polish–German reconciliation 'a miracle'. However, this honeymoon period ended when the socially conservative and Eurosceptic Law and Justice (PiS) party won Poland's 2015 elections, remaining in power for eight challenging years until losing their majority in October 2023. Unlike previous post-1989 governments, PiS did not prioritise relations with Berlin, and actively worked to counter perceived Franco–German EU dominance. Key contentions included divergent approaches to Russia, migration, climate policies, and European integration. Historical tensions resurfaced as Warsaw threatened to sue Germany for wartime reparations, while Poland's departure from liberal-democratic principles – undermining its Constitutional Court and judicial independence – created domestic incompatibility with Germany's fundamental values. Previously, scholars attributed progress in Polish–German relations to European integration's consensus-building impact, similar to Franco–West German relations during and after the Cold War. However, questions arose about whether this mitigating effect diminished as Poland achieved full EU membership and claimed stakeholder status in the integration process. The analysis argues that while Europeanisation's importance for Poland's domestic transition has weakened, it still plays a vital role in Warsaw–Berlin relations. Despite the turbulent 2015–2023 period, Polish–German relations would have been far more problematic without the broader European framework that continues to encourage cooperation between both capitals.

Keywords: europeanisation, Poland, Germany, security, economy, enlargement

EUROPEIZACJA STOSUNKÓW POLSKO-NIEMIECKICH W OKRESIE RZĄDÓW PRAWA I SPRAWIEDLIWOŚCI

Streszczenie

Po zjednoczeniu Niemiec i upadku komunizmu stosunki polsko-niemieckie doświadczyły znaczącej poprawy, stając się jednymi z filarów bezpieczeństwa europejskiego. Ta transformacja ułatwiła rozszerzenie UE, zwiększyła handel oraz kontakty międzyludzkie. Do 2015–2016 roku postrzeganie tych stosunków stale się poprawiało w obu krajach, a były minister spraw zagranicznych Polski Bronisław Geremek określił polsko-niemieckie pojednanie mianem „cudu”. Jednak ten stale rosnący trend zakończył się, gdy eurosceptyczna partia Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS) wygrała wybory w Polsce w 2015 r., pozostając przy władzy przez osiem lat, aż do utraty większości w październiku 2023 r. W przeciwieństwie do poprzednich rządów po 1989 r., PiS nie traktował priorytetowo stosunków z Berlinem i aktywnie działał na rzecz równoważenia postrzeganej dominacji francusko-niemieckiej w UE. Główne punkty sporne obejmowały odmienne podejścia do Rosji, migracji, polityki klimatycznej i integracji europejskiej. Napięcia historyczne powróciły, gdy Warszawa zagroziła pozwaniem Niemiec o reparacje wojenne, podczas gdy odejście Polski od zasad liberalno-demokratycznych – podważanie zasad rządów prawa i atakowanie niezależności sądownictwa – stworzyło niezgodność z fundamentalnymi wartościami Republiki Federalnej Niemiec. Wcześniej analitycy przypisywali postęp w stosunkach polsko-niemieckich wpływowi integracji europejskiej na budowanie konsensusu, powołując się na przykład stosunków francusko-zachodnio-niemieckich. Jednak pojawiły się pytania, czy wpływ integracji europejskiej nie osłabł, gdy Polska osiągnęła pełne członkostwo w UE. Niniejsza analiza dowodzi, że choć znaczenie europeizacji dla transformacji wewnętrznej Polski osłabło, nadal odgrywa ona kluczową rolę w stosunkach Warszawa–Berlin. Pomimo licznych bilateralnych sporów okresie 2015–2023, stosunki polsko-niemieckie byłyby znacznie bardziej problematyczne, gdyby zostały pozbawione szerszych ram europejskich, które nadal zachęcają obie stolice do współpracy.

Słowa kluczowe: europeizacja, Polska, Niemcy, bezpieczeństwo, gospodarka, rozszerzenie