



Weekly Briefing

**Poland external relations briefing:
Polish-German relations in the jubilee year
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Polish-German relations in the jubilee year

Recent months are not easy for Polish-German relations. Despite the meetings between Chancellor Angela Merkel and Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki, numerous meetings of foreign ministers and lower-level officials, Polish-German relations run in a tense atmosphere. The demands, formulated in Warsaw, for Germany to pay war reparations - though made still only verbally - cast a shadow over mutual affairs.

2019 – a year of great anniversaries in Polish-German relations

The year 2019 is a special year in Polish-German relations, which leads to numerous summaries and important events, but also points out problems in bilateral affairs. First of all, the important, yet sad, 80th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II and the armed invasion of the Third German Reich on Poland – already celebrated on September 1 (on that day in 1939, German Wehrmacht troops attacked the Polish border town of Wieluń, while the Kriegsmarine ships attacked the Westerplatte peninsula near Gdansk). Secondly, it is also the anniversary of the events of 1989 - including the so-called “Reconciliation Mass” in Krzyżowa from November 12, 1989 and the beginning of the Polish-German reconciliation process by the then heads of government, Helmut Kohl, German Chancellor and Tadeusz Mazowiecki, Polish Prime Minister. Thirdly, the anniversary of the year 1999 - Polish accession to NATO defense structures, as well as, fourthly, the jubilee of 15 years in the European Union (accession in 2004). These last events are treated by both countries as joint successes and celebrated as an example of excellent cooperation, which led to the stabilization of the political and economic situation in this part of Europe, and at the same time contributed to the breakthrough process of reunion, which completely changed our common present and has had impact on peaceful relations across the continent.

Despite many optimistic anniversaries and all work related to reconciliation over the last 30 years, recently difficult problems are coming back in Polish-German relations, which are a splinter and a challenge for both countries. Currently - once again - Polish politicians are using Polish-German relations to create internal policy in Poland. The hot topic is the question of possible reparations that the Federal Republic should pay to Poland as compensation for moral, human and material losses as a result of the occupation of Poland by the Third Reich in 1939-1945.

The matter of war reparations in Poland

This subject has been present in Polish political discourse since 2017, however it returned with redoubled force, in particular around September 1, 2019, when German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Chancellor Angela Merkel made official visits to Poland. Only couple of days earlier, President Andrzej Duda in an interview for the German daily newspaper “Bild”, emphasized: “Reparations from Germany are a matter of responsibility and morality. The war we are talking about today caused huge losses in Poland. Poland’s losses have never been evened out. The Polish parliament estimates the losses and will bill Germany.” President also emphasized that although Poland and Germany are a model states for reconciliation, reparations are a matter of liability and ethics in German policy towards Poland.

Similarly, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki in an interview for German media pointed out, that: “Poland has not received adequate compensation from Germany for the atrocities of World War II. We have lost 6 million people - much more than other countries that have received high reparations. This is not fair. It can’t stay like this.” Also during the celebrations at Westerplatte, Morawiecki mentioned the compensations: “One has to remember about those victims, because today’s Poland was born of them; one has to talk about those losses, demand the truth and compensation.”

It was likewise assumed by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Culture Piotr Gliński, who was explaining why Warsaw is demanding financial compensation from Germany and whether it is possible: “Poland has a very good chance of obtaining war reparations. (...) This should be the pillar of justice and responsibility of Germany.”

Officially, the issue of compensation has never been on the agenda of intergovernmental teams or during consultations at the highest level. Polish authorities usually say quite round sentences, but they have never made a clear declaration to Berlin on this matter. Therefore, the issue of reparations is often seen as an element of internal policy in Poland and building own conservative electorate by Law and Justice Party, which is rather anti-German and is afraid of German domination in Europe. Indeed, this is an important matter for a large part of society - in the latest research made by the Pollster Research Institute it turned out, that 58% respondents believe that Poland deserves war reparations.

Their height raises a lot of interest as well. For last two years the work on estimating the amount of these reparations is already underway. The effort of the parliamentary team created

especially for that issue is carried out by MP Arkadiusz Mularczyk. In preliminary calculations, Mularczyk estimated that Germany's compensation for Poland should amount to USD 850 billion. However, the final report of his team on this matter is not yet known.

An opinion on possible reparations has also recently been presented by the Bureau of Sejm Analyzes (subordinate to the chancellery of the Polish parliament), saying: "It is reasonable to state that the Republic of Poland is entitled to claims for damages against the Federal Republic of Germany, and to state that these claims have not expired." The Bureau calculates Polish war losses for USD 885 billion.

The matter of war reparations in Germany

These statements were lately commented on by the German side - spokesman for the German government Steffen Seibert, underlined: "From our point of view, legally and politically (the matter of reparations) is closed". Anyway, the German government has repeatedly rejected Polish demands in recent years, recalling that this issue was legally regulated at the Potsdam conference in August 1945, when the USSR undertook to pay reparation claims and subsequent compensation agreements to Poland - in fact though, it never happened.

At the same time, Berlin's top-level politicians do not want to comment directly on the matter, although President Steinmeier himself indicates that Germans are morally responsible for atrocities caused by the Germans to the Polish nation, but a possible debate on reparations would be "detrimental to Polish-German relations."

It should also be honestly admitted that in the years after 1989, as part of the reconciliation process - expressed as assistance in the reconstruction of the state, infrastructure changes, renovation of buildings, etc. - Poland has received EUR 1.5 billion from Germany as a financial support. In addition, victims of German pseudo-medical experiments as well as forced workers and prisoners of concentration camps received compensation in the late 1990s in the total amount of approx. EUR 1.2 billion. For this reason, the German side considers the topic as closed.

So, the case is pending, and arouses great interest in Poland and in Germany (the sum of damages is extremely high, although it is difficult to clearly calculate material and human losses). It also negatively affects mutual relations, although there are many more challenges for

bilateral affairs. We face nowadays indeed a landmark year in Polish-German relations. Under the slogan of “illiberal democracy in Poland”, Berlin-Warsaw relations are heading towards the most serious test yet. For a long time it was thought that through restraint, patience and the method of small steps, it would be possible to develop a *modus vivendi* with partners in Warsaw and Berlin. Yet, after the power was passed by Law and Justice party in autumn 2015, relations between the two countries have entered a period of marked cooling. Although theoretically, bilateral exchange works normally – there are annual intergovernmental meetings, meetings at the highest level are held as well, and at the same time there are many social, regional and local initiatives, it can be felt that these relations are not as good as they once were. This is due to the confrontational policy pursued by the authorities in Warsaw on one hand. And on the other hand this is due to Berlin’s uncertainty and considerable helplessness in relations to Poland combined with traditional German pride and ignorance of Poland.

Conclusion

Today, we are facing a real deterioration in Polish-German relations. The ruling camp in Poland aims to build such ties between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe to balance Germany’s strength - PiS is trying to do this by playing fear of Germany and building a “negative coalition” against Berlin in CEE countries. There are slogans about the domination of German capital, the spread of Germany in Europe and in Poland, and even about the fact that Germans maintained agentism and “pro-German conspiracy” among Poles. Critical opinions about the PiS government’s activities coming from Brussels are described as “the German collusion against Poland.” Even review of right-wing media shows that Germany is to blame for Poland’s political and economic problems. Bills issued for war harm are an emanation of this policy. What is forgotten is what the two countries have achieved together over the past 30 years.

On the other hand, German media and politicians mostly strongly criticize PiS and often exaggerate in analyzing the situation in Poland, writing about the “coup”, “putinization”, “authoritarianism” or “xenophobia” and the “national-conservative-Catholic revolution” since 2015. There are moderate voices in Germany, but they do not get through often, although the German government tries to save relations with Warsaw and refrains from criticizing the PiS government as such.

Yet, the greatest danger for bilateral understanding may be somewhere else. Mutual prejudices, also associated with the years 1939-1945, are disseminated over the internet, which

means that their coverage may get out of control. If this happens, we are threatened not so much with open hostility, because this may not, however, move to an interstate level, but another black scenario - the return of indifference on both sides. Germany, in which the political crisis associated i.e. with gigantic migration may exacerbate, will not have patience to care for relations with Poles. In turn, in Poland, occupied with internal verbal and symbolic struggle between the right wing and the rest of the political and social forces, relations with Germany may become hostage to Polish-Polish quarrels. Anyway, it is slowly becoming apparent.