

# A Fresh Impetus for German Polish Relations

Proposals for an Intensification of Bilateral Cooperation

*Jutta Frasch*

German-Polish relations have become considerably more relaxed since the government of Donald Tusk took office in November 2007. A number of controversial bilateral issues have either been resolved (the Centre against Expulsions), judged by the European Court of Human Rights (which ruled that compensation claims brought against Poles by expellees under the auspices of the so-called Preußische Treuhand [Prussian Claims Society] were inadmissible) or are at least continuing to be negotiated in more rational terms (the Nordstream gas pipeline through the Baltic Sea). The at times aggressive anti-German rhetoric of the Kaczyński government has been replaced by a business-like approach, and the two governments have intensified their dialogue, both bilaterally and in the EU. All this paves the way for bilateral relations to focus more strongly on the issues of the future and make them more crisis-proof. The next German government should therefore set itself ambitious goals with respect to Poland and initiate new forms of contact and projects that will serve to strengthen cooperation.

The coalition government of Prime Minister Donald Tusk that took office in Warsaw in November 2007 is stable. Tusk's party, the Civic Platform (PO), won 44.5% of the vote in the European elections with a turnout of just under 25% and is by far the strongest political force in Poland. The largest opposition party is the national-conservative populist Law and Justice party (PiS), which under the leadership of Tusk's predecessor Jarosław Kaczyński, succeeded in winning 27.5% of the vote to the European parliament.

Tusk's greatest problem is his government's cohabitation with State President

Lech Kaczyński, who does not view his office as politically neutral and as representing all Poles but instead, from the very beginning, put it in the service of the Law and Justice party founded by the Kaczyński brothers. This puts a brake on the government's efforts to institute domestic reforms and has also had an impact on foreign policy and on Poland's policy towards the EU.

Tusk, who saw himself in the 2005 election campaign as the victim of an anti-German campaign staged by the Kaczyński brothers and their PiS party, has adopted a cautious approach in expanding ties with

Germany. Nevertheless, he has taken a number of bold steps that demonstrate the importance he attaches to good relations with Berlin.

### **A Narrow Window for the Intensification of Relations**

The following proposals for stronger bilateral cooperation are based on the political consensus in Germany that one of the priorities of German foreign policy remains to fully overcome the East-West division of Europe and to complete the process of reconciliation with its eastern partners and have closer ties with them. Here Poland plays a key role analogous to that played by France for Germany in the West. The past five years have shown that European unity will not be achieved unless account is taken of the, in some cases, very different perspectives of the EU's eastern members. Amicable cooperation based on trust between Germany and Poland will further this process in many different ways, from the eastern neighbourhood policy to the further development of the internal European market. Wherever possible, bilateral arrangements between Poland and Germany should be expanded into trilateral cooperation with France; by the same token, the possibility of including Poland in bilateral cooperation between Germany and France should always be examined.

The window of opportunity for launching initiatives and injecting new dynamism into bilateral relations is limited to the short space of time between the elections to the German Bundestag [in the autumn of 2009] and the Polish presidential elections at the end of 2010 for which Prime Minister Tusk may stand, or at the latest the next parliamentary elections in Poland in 2011. Given the currently favourable conditions this narrow window should be used intensively.

### **“Poznan Meetings” as a Way of Strengthening Political Dialogue**

The Treaty on Good Neighbourhood, Friendship and Cooperation signed between Germany and Poland in 1991 regulates official political dialogue and stipulates that the heads of government, foreign ministers and other ministers of the two countries should meet at least once a year. The treaty's provisions are flexible, however, allowing a greater number of meetings if required. In relations between Germany and France the so-called Blaesheim meetings (regular informal meetings between the German chancellor, the French president and the foreign ministers) have proven valuable. A similar format involving meetings between the German chancellor and the Polish prime minister and the two foreign ministers should be introduced into the German-Polish relationship, perhaps initially in a quarterly rhythm in order not to overcrowd the appointments calendar.

Such a forum would allow bilateral issues to be discussed in peace and quiet with a certain routine, without the need for extensive protocols and without a lot of media attention, and also permit international problems to be addressed and solutions found. A German-Polish counterpart of this kind to the “Blaesheim meetings,” which might be called the “Poznan meetings,” could convene before each session of the Council of Europe to address the most important points on the Council's agenda and try to agree on a common line to be taken during negotiations. This would allow each side to become better acquainted with the goals and motives of the other – knowledge of which is currently largely lacking. Reaching and adhering to agreements fosters trust – an important precondition for the two partners to approach each other self-confidently. The aim of these talks should be to avoid unpleasant surprises, such as the unilateral announcement at short notice of the Nordstream Pipeline project through the Baltic Sea or Poland's intention to station components of the US rocket defence system on its terri-

tory. Projects of such importance need to be discussed intensively in bilateral talks.

Over time the “Poznan meetings” could also be used to address highly sensitive issues, such as coming to terms with the past or the treatment of German cultural possessions in Poland, and possibly resolve them. Yet as the German-French model has shown, we should not expect any miracles from such a format. If the political will to engage in closer cooperation is lacking on either side, its effectiveness will be limited. The initially very positive experience with “Blaesheim” should, however, encourage the establishment of a German-Polish pendant. As in “Blaesheim” the “Poznan process” should include more intense dialogue between ministers other than the foreign ministers. There is certainly no shortage of topics that could be jointly analysed: relations with key partners like Russia, the United States, China, Brazil and India; the future of security policy in Afghanistan and Iran; the role of NATO; energy and environmental policy or overcoming the financial and economic crisis.

A further spin-off from such meetings could be a more intensive dialogue between government officials. This applies particularly to the two countries’ foreign ministries, where an exchange of officials would provide a good mechanism for promoting long-term mutual understanding. Both sides should undertake to provide the resources (for example in a framework agreement) for such an exchange to be regular and meaningful.

### **People to People Contacts**

Ultimately what will breathe life into the German-Polish relationship is mutual understanding between citizens regarding their common history and the current situation in the neighbouring country. To overcome continuing prejudices on both sides exchange programmes should be strengthened and expanded. This applies to the very successful youth exchange programme Deutsch-Polnisches Jugendwerk as

well as to the recently established German-Polish Research Foundation. In addition the two sides should consider how existing programmes for contacts between future managers can be intensified. At a time when public budgets are strained, new ways must be found to finance such efforts; in addition existing facilities should consider how they might pool their activities. Contacts between people living in border regions are particularly intensive. Here Poland’s joining the Schengen zone has made new forms of coexistence possible that were unthinkable until recently and that are now comparable with those on Germany’s western and southwestern borders. There cooperation between Germany and France, Switzerland and Luxembourg has been legally regulated since 1994 by the Karlsruhe Agreement. The time would appear ripe for a similar agreement between Germany and Poland.

### **Political Symbols and Impulses for Bilateral Relations**

Symbols, gestures, serious expressions of commitment to the respective partner and signals from high-level political representatives are particularly important for relations between Poland and Germany. The anniversaries of events in recent common history should be used to pay tribute to what has been achieved so far and to provide a fresh impetus. 2009 offers a number of occasions of this kind – 1 September and 9 November will be the next dates in the calendar of symbolic significance. Possible ways of marking them might be an agreement on expanding the community centre in Kreisau into a cultural and events centre, the initiation of an annual German-Polish day (or week) etc.

### **Using a Stronger Bilateral Base Constructively in the EU**

The five years since it became a member of the EU have been very positive for Poland. Above-average economic growth, falling

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unemployment and improvements in the infrastructure made with the help of the EU structural funds are just a few of the reasons why Polish public approval for the EU remains at a constantly very high level (around 75%). As Poland's most important economic partner Germany has benefited from these developments not only through a sharp rise in exports, but also through the direct investments it has made in Poland, which have fostered economic links and often helped secure jobs in Germany. The German government's policy of keeping the German employment market more or less closed until 2011 to labour from the states that joined the EU in 2004 is at odds with these developments and nourishes fears on the Polish side of being treated as a second-class member of the EU. When the next German government takes office in the autumn of this year it should abolish this arrangement as a confidence-building measure. Such a gesture would have few practical consequences but make a great political and psychological impact both in Poland and in the other new EU member-states.

In the wake of the financial crisis and the devaluation of the Polish currency the Tusk government decided against the will of President Kaczyński to try to speed up Poland's entry into the eurozone. Poland now is fully aware that it must meet the Maastricht criteria if it is to qualify. Germany could publically voice approval for this project and offer Poland political and practical support, for example by sending experts from the Bundesbank or the Federal Ministry of Finance to the Polish National Bank and or the Polish Finance Ministry.

Politically speaking Poland has shown itself to be a tough negotiating partner in the EU right from the start, irrespective of which party is in power at home, and has been conspicuous in articulating its own national interests. Since he appeared on the European stage Prime Minister Tusk has adopted a less confrontational style, instead seeking interest coalitions within the EU in order to advance his positions. European

policy offers major opportunities for more intensive bilateral dialogue between Germany and Poland. The two countries should try to develop joint initiatives or to find lines of compromise in areas where interests run contrary. Cases in point here are the EU's relations with Russia (given the remarkable way Polish-Russian relations have developed) or the emergence of a common European energy policy. Some observers believe that energy policy is an area that could lend a new impetus to the European integration process and is hence a particularly suitable topic for more detailed discussion in the German-Polish dialogue. Finally, the forthcoming discussion of the EU's next financial perspective must be carefully prepared. The goal should be for the greatest net contributor (Germany) and the greatest net beneficiary (Poland) to reach workable compromises.

Because of the enormous significance of the EU for both countries German-Polish dialogue on issues of EU policy is a particularly suitable channel for focusing the bilateral relationship on future issues.