

Bulletin

Institute for Western Affairs

Poland and Germany – Opportunities and Limitations for a Partnership within the European Union

This paper has been written within the framework of the research project “Poles, Germany and the future of the European Union” carried out by the Poznań Institute for Western Affairs and the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Warsaw.

No. 152 / 2013
17'12'13

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

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A closer partnership between Poland and Germany in the European Union will be difficult to establish. The Polish political elites have been circumspect on the issue. They have proposed no broad-based critical ideas on how best to adjust Polish politics to Germany's new line. While the approach adopted by Chancellor Merkel may strengthen the eurozone and bolster Germany's leadership in the EU, it may also further divide the Union and further complicate the politics that surround Poland's accession to the eurozone. The fact that Polish ideas about German intentions to revamp EU architecture are incompatible with reality and that Poland's position on changing the configuration of forces within the EU remains ambiguous, make it considerably more difficult to form a strategic partnership.

(1) Polish-German relations are considered to be close. Both countries are determined to tighten cooperation in various new fields. This is evidenced by, among others, the conclusion of a special cooperation program on the 20th anniversary of the signing of the Polish-German Treaty on Good Neighborship and Friendly Cooperation of 1991. An explicit example of cooperation for tighter partnership was Germany's support for the Polish presidency in the EU Council in the second half of 2011. The countries' common interests included reviving the European Security and Defense Policy and the Eastern Partnership as well as streamlining the economic governance of the EU (Poland and Germany shared interest in adopting the so called six-pack although discrepancies between the two were markedly divided in their opinions on the Fiscal Compact). Gradually, the tightening of cooperation among the eurozone member states began to impact Poland's European policy and its EU relations. In anticipation of Poland's joining of the eurozone, the Polish government sought Germany's support for gaining a say in defining the future political shape of the eurozone. On the other hand, Germany is well in a position to understand Poland's expectations as, being a pivotal country for Germany's European policy and a key state among aspirers to eurozone accession which had also traditionally backed Germany's policies, Poland appears to be a natural strategic partner and ally, especially that it had consistently supported Germany's leadership in the EU. Furthermore, the two countries share keen interest in trans-Atlantic relations.

(2) Is a closer strategic partnership between Poland and Germany feasible? Are the European orientations pursued by the two countries commensurate despite their mismatched powers? Is a strategic partnership justified mainly by the European roles played by Poland and Germany? This last question is unavoidable. Even cursory examination of the views of Polish and German political elites shows clear differences



between the ways they view and interpret their roles in the European Union. Nevertheless, such roles may prove to be compatible as even highly divergent conceptual approaches can be reconciled if the actions they imply within the existing alliances (such as NATO and the EU) and strategic partnerships (such as that between Germany and France) complement each other and fit into an agreed task sharing plan. On the other hand, even similar concepts of the national role, such as those centered on the pursuit of leadership or national sovereignty, may contradict each other and prevent effective cooperation within an alliance or a partnership. By and large, it is the effectiveness and mutual consistency of efforts by strategic partners rather than a similarity of concepts that makes their roles compatible.

(3) Without a doubt, an internal policy of Poland and Germany built around ideas and views which mutually reinforce and legitimize one another would lay the groundwork for forging a closer partnership within the EU framework. Are the present circumstances this favorable? Is Poland prepared to accept Germany's aspirations to stand at the helm of the EU? Has Germany crystallized its expectations regarding Poland's role in Europe? Is Germany aware of Poland's aspirations to become one of Europe's key players and join the privileged "big six"?

(4) Much of the narrative coming from Poland's intellectual and political elites rests on the assumption that Polish-German relations are indeed close or at least have considerable potential for improvement. They therefore generally recommend that both sides seek closeness in ever more areas and see each other as strategic partners. On the other hand, they find it obvious that such relations are not even remotely as intimate as those between Germany and France. The Polish commentators who took stock of the mutual Polish-German relationship after Poland's Council presidency amidst the EU's growing criticism of Germany's ideas to repair the eurozone, which might potentially disintegrate the EU, were profoundly realistic in their assessments and forecasts suggesting that Poland would find it difficult to become Germany's "strategic partner". There is a growing conviction in Poland that in order to make its relationship with Germany more equitable and partner-like or even strategic [Buras/Reiter, Center for International Relations 2012], Poland would have to join the eurozone [Łada, Institute of Public Affairs 2013] or have its partnership for Europe with Germany based on a specific common roadmap designed to prevent members of the eurozone as well as other EU member states from going their own separate ways. Moreover, it was thought that due to the rapid changes seen in the eurozone and regardless of any objective economic and legal constitutional reasons,



having no accession date undermines Poland's political standing in the EU. Such sentiments were in fact well justified. Perhaps by avoiding discussions on the timing of Poland's entry into the eurozone, Polish political elites impede debates about Poland's aspirations in the EU. On the other hand, fixing the eurozone accession date prematurely could weaken Poland's negotiating position.

(5) Opportunities for Poland to rise to significance in Europe and the influence that relations with Germany have on such a process may well be examined in reference to the future of the European Union. Generally, the Polish discourse offers very few comprehensive or consistent views on the future of the EU presented in the context of Poland's role to be played in the future Union. The views expressed by Polish intellectual and political elites (whether representing the executive or the legislative branch) are more or less incomplete and highly cautious of any Germany-initiated measures designed to reform the eurozone. This is despite the fact that an evolution of the EU towards institutions made up of qualitatively diverse groups of member states is considered inevitable and despite the belief that the EU may disintegrate through the inadvertent operation of various processes is fairly widespread.

(6) This notwithstanding, the program of European Union development advocated by Chancellor Merkel's administration proposes to use the so called EU method and recommends pursuing objectives which, depending on the observer's viewpoint, may seem either dysfunctional or complementary. The point is, on the one hand, to tighten cooperation in the eurozone by enhancing cooperation mechanisms and strengthening the budget discipline in eurozone countries and, on the other, to preserve European integration in a system covering all member states. The prospect of an EU breakup is a huge challenge for Poland as it weighs the advantages and disadvantages of various terms and deadlines for entering the eurozone. One inevitable consequence of acceding to the eurozone is a commitment to abide by various rules for eurozone development, including some being negotiated at this time. Some such rules may prove to be economically and politically disadvantageous for Poland and for its future role in the EU. This ties to the need to adjust to the requirements which are currently being defined and will be defined in the future by the core eurozone countries acting in what resembles a historical concert of powers.

(7) Polish interest in reforming and transforming the EU to streamline its operations tends to focus on the traditional postulates to ensure the EU's development by



the community method (bestowing more powers on the European Commission and giving more clout to the European Parliament). However, Poland also clearly approves strengthening the reforms initiated with the Lisbon Treaty which concern the President and the powers of the High Representative of the EU and the European External Action Service. Polish preferences go much further in their historical and strategic references. The point is not only to achieve the EU's institutional efficiency and the capacity to engage internationally. The community method and the significance attributed to the Commission are common for small and medium-sized states. Both are seen as a guarantee of a balance of forces within the EU, i.e. as an institutional antidote to the influence of larger member states.

(8) The aspiration of the larger states, such as Germany and France, to subjugate the European Commission and suppress or circumvent the community method in favor of supporting the intergovernmental method, may prompt small and medium-sized countries to respond with a reflex reaction of skepticism, criticism and even negation. Such countries have in fact always been anxious about Germany or France succumbing to inclinations to create a group of powers bent on dominating, subordinating and dividing the European continent. Poland may perceive a shift towards the intergovernmental method in efforts to carry out institutional reforms as upsetting the European balance and, even worse, as a reminder of its traumatic history which in turn might provoke the right end of the political spectrum to voice its opposition.

(9) Although the tendencies to integrate Europe by the methods proposed by Chancellor Merkel grow increasingly stronger, the Polish intellectual and political elites show few signs of profound critical reflection on the extent to which the Polish position could or should be modified to accommodate Germany's emerging line. A pursuit of European integration by modifying the roles of European institutions (i.e. by weakening and reorienting the European Commission, establishing a special eurozone budget and changing the role of the Parliament) and tightening bonds outside of that institutional framework (by elevating the European Stability Mechanism to the role of the primary mechanism for exercising power in the eurozone) will not only strengthen the eurozone and Germany's leadership but also increase the risk of deepening divisions within the EU. In tactical terms, such developments would make the political context of Poland's accession to the eurozone more complex. Poland's position has been haunted by the fears that, in an attempt to cleanse and reform the eurozone, strengthened by French support, Germany may no longer care to keep the



European Union as a consistent whole. Chancellor Merkel's approach elicited Poland's resistance as it appeared to be an attempt to weaken the European Commission at the expense of the interests of the "pre-ins", i.e. to keep them from entering the zone. This made the Polish approach and opinions in Poland doubly ambivalent: while Poland's anxiety over the possible breakup of the EU mixed with the basic presumption that the eurozone reform is by all means in Poland's interest; there was also ambivalence in being torn between its interest in preserving the cohesion of an EU made up of 27 member states and its disapproval for the exclusivity of the solutions and aspiration to join the hard core ("the big six"). Such inconsistencies come to light in Polish debates and may affect Poland's influence in the EU.

(10) The incompatibility of Poland's ideas and Germany's actions to revamp the EU's architecture and establish new mechanisms to govern the eurozone and Poland's ambiguous position on the changing configuration of forces within the EU, implying the emergence of a group of powerful nations (against Poland's interests), are the main barriers to the formation of mutual relations approximating a strategic partnership in anticipation of Poland's future membership in the eurozone. Little doubt remains about Poland's inability, at the present stage, to form such a partnership, despite all the political closeness achieved by the two countries. Notably, however, Germany also sees its leadership role as an obligation to reach out, selectively and to the extent possible, to Poland to accommodate its postulates to participate in defining the future of the eurozone (participation without voting). What is at stake for Germany, even during the transition run-up to Poland's eurozone membership, is to ensure structural support in the future from a partner which has traditionally been known to side with Germany. Once Poland accedes to the eurozone, Germany stands to benefit from having it established in the role of a partner offsetting the reservations by various states, such as those of southern Europe, in various fields (fiscal policy), thereby legitimizing German projects. Such states are reluctant to accept Germany's leadership and, as a consequence, impede EU reforms. In effect, Berlin may expect Poland to influence the balance of forces between the south and the north of the eurozone. Although France is by far Germany's most crucial partner followed by the Netherlands, Austria (and Finland), Germany nevertheless needs "the Polish option" to form its coalition within the EU. After all, Poland is the principal state of Central Europe and one most willing to promote integration, which is in sharp contrast with the skeptical stance of the United Kingdom.



(11) Can Poland modify its position and ideas about the integration method favored by Germany and reassess its identity as a mid-sized country which is culturally sensitive to the kinds of fluctuations in the European configuration of forces that may strengthen the relationship of domination and subordination? In particular, is it actually possible to tighten the Polish-German partnership within the EU and turn it into a strategic relationship as Poland joins the eurozone? This would supposedly be a *sine qua non* condition for ushering in a new era in the mutual relations between the two countries and a prerequisite for redefining Poland's role in the EU which, as a matter of fact, is nevertheless largely determined by German influence. Are Polish political and intellectual elites as well as the Polish public opinion prepared to accept a bandwagoning strategy? Germany's prior contributions as a supporter of Poland's accession into the EU and NATO are undeniable. Tighter cooperation within the eurozone would redefine Poland's relationship with Germany by making it not as much a pact between two equal partners but rather by preserving the traditional model of "advocate and aspirant". It seems that in the absence of a unanimous consensus in domestic politics on Poland's European policy (including, inter alia, Poland's eurozone accession), this poorly articulated and perhaps premature idea of a strategic partnership is failing to gain proper momentum in the relevant discourse and is simply set to lapse. This status of mutual relations is best described by another formula which reflects the nature of Germany's policy in the EU and Poland's only partially defined status in the European Union. Germany, "the reluctant hegemon" [Bulmer/Paterson, "Journal of European Public Policy" 20:10, 2013], an EU leader facing dilemmas resulting from the use of unilateralist solutions and the EU's disintegration, meets Poland, "the reluctant legitimizer", upset about its possible marginalization resulting from its support for German projects while underestimating its own growing legitimization significance for Germany and at times overestimating its own capacity to make policy within the EU (as when faced with the United Kingdom's growing *désintéressement* towards the EU).

The theses included in this text express the opinions of the author only.

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