

Germany and Poland: Public Opinion on the Rise?

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Polish – German relations have always been influenced by social perceptions and prejudices. The history of neighborhood ties is filled with tumultuous events and conflict rather than common policies and cooperation. For several centuries, (divided and unified) Germany and Poland have been deadly enemies, pursuing different policies and fueling the fire of opposing interests. Yet the chances of a final reconciliation between Germany and Poland have never been better. Numerous joint projects in the cultural, political, economical and social spheres, compounded by membership in the European Union, are facilitating unprecedented bilateral cooperation between the two countries. Nevertheless the question arises as to whether the people from both countries are ready for the rapprochement. Until 1989 and the downfall of Soviet Union, building this relationship would not at all have been possible. Western Germany was not eager to develop any kind of dialogue with communist Poland, and East Germany tried to set itself apart from Eastern Europe and sustain the profound conviction that Poland was a backward black hole. Politicians on both sides now seem to understand that although history is important, what really matters is the common present and future within the European Union. Thus they try to avoid any misunderstandings which might stem from past conflicts, and instead support cooperation and exchange with enthusiasm. The real challenge lies, of course, in changing average peoples' perception of their neighbors. These ingrained stereotypes have been passed on by one generation to another for decades and will not change overnight.

The German perception of Polish people used to be very negative. Although it still has many pejorative aspects, it has been evolving into a much more positive, or to be more precise, ambivalent opinion. In a survey conducted by

the Institute of Public Affairs in 2000, 44% of German respondents viewed Poland as a remote and backward country. Six years later, this percentage fell to 32%. Dishonesty was the second most often mentioned negative association for Germans in 2000, appearing in 37% of surveys, whereas this fell to only 30% in 2006. Other common negative associations were passiveness, bad management and intolerance. None of the negative traits were mentioned more in 2006 than in 2000; most of them were mentioned fewer times. Polish people are however still presented in German mass media as potential car-thieves. There is an infamous saying, "Go to Poland, your car is already there". This saying dates back to the late 80s, when Polish gangs would turn up beyond the Odra river and take special interest in stealing and trading in German cars which were at that time unavailable in Poland. German public opinion tends to resort to national stereotype from time to time. It is no wonder, then, that negative connotations prevail more often among people who derive their knowledge about their neighbor from mass media than among those who have visited Poland or have friends there. At the same time, the percentage of people with positive impressions of Poland has risen slightly over the last six years. Polish people are increasingly associated with diligence (30% in 2000, 38% in 2006) and tolerance (27% in 2000, 31% in 2006). Good organization skills and discipline were also cited more often in 2006 than 2000. Experts claim that since Polish accession to European Union, Germans have started to perceive Polish people as being more dynamic and modern on one hand, and less traditional and religious on the other. A fast developing economy and changes to social awareness have forced Germans to acknowledge that Poland is reforming. Further, it is quite striking that although negative responses have diminished, positive ones have remained more or less the at the same level. This implies that Germans must first fight their negative opinions before they are able to positively re-align their opinions.

Following German reunification in 1990, the Polish attitude towards Germany was characterized by anxiety and fear. Ghosts of history helped to shape an antagonistic relationship between the two nations. Fortunately, the situation has changed relatively quickly and Polish people have stopped perceiving

their neighbor as a political and military threat. In 1990, 88% of respondents expressed their anxiety about Germany according to the Polish Institute of Public Affairs. In 1992 and 2005, only 58% and 21% of Polish people gave the same answer respectively. Polish people have started to see Germans as modern, hard-working and well-educated. We might assume that Germany has become an ideal example of a well-structured and functioning state in light of the turbulent transition from communism to democracy that Poland experienced,. Thus German people represented everything what Polish people had to struggle for. Poles perceived Germans as being goal-oriented and well-ordered. German detailed, structured life has, however, become the subject of jokes in Poland; people might laugh about Germans' inflexibility and inadaptability to uncertain and unforeseen situations. On the other hand, Polish people are less likely to attribute "warm" associations to Germans: for instance, only 34% of respondents believed that Germans were tolerant and 36% that they are kind toward others.

There is evidence of greater Polish sympathy towards Germans than German sympathy toward Poles. According to the Polish CBOS (Center for Researching Public Opinion), 44% of the respondents stated that they were fond of Germans, placing them closely behind eternal Polish friends, the Americans, French and Czechs. Twenty three per cent of people said that they had an aversion to Germans. On the German part, the most-prevailing response, from 60% of Poles, was "neither sympathy, nor aversion" which illustrates an ambivalent attitude from Germans toward Polish people. Polish people remain much more interested in Germany than vice-versa.

It is however very encouraging that people from both sides of the border have an open stance towards each other regardless of political relations between Berlin and Warsaw, which have been quite volatile over the last years. Polish accession to the European Union has certainly had an effect in this respect. Germany strongly supported Polish efforts from the very beginning, demonstrating both historical remorse and a dedication to the democratic reforms of its Eastern-European partners. Germany is deemed to be the country that contributed the most to implementing change both domestically

and at the level of international relations in Poland. In the aftermath of numerous common projects realized not only at the level of the European Union, people from both sides of the Odra river are getting to know each other one more time.

Bibliography

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