

Germany and Poland seek rapprochement

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Warsaw saw efforts on both sides improve bilateral relations after they had deteriorated sharply under the Polish PiS government. The German and Polish bourgeoisie were responding to the threatened breakup of the European Union (EU) and the American presidency of Donald Trump, whose policies are calling the foreign policy orientation of both countries into question.

Merkel first spoke with Polish President Andrzej Duda and Prime Minister Beata Szydło, before holding her most important discussion with PiS leader and the most influential politician in Poland, Jarosław Kaczyński. Following these discussions, Merkel met with representatives of the liberal opposition.

Over the past 14 months, the PiS government has largely done away with the division of powers and rapidly constructed an authoritarian regime. It sought to forge a close alliance with the US in its military build-up against Russia and to construct a right-wing alliance in eastern Europe, directed both against Russia and Germany.

Chiefly as a result of this foreign policy orientation, the German media and political parties sharply attacked Poland early last year under the guise of defending democratic rights. The extent of the hypocrisy involved is now clear, with the media, facing changed geopolitical conditions, having abandoned the phrases about "democracy" and emphasising the need to build close pragmatic relationships.

Merkel's criticism of the Polish government was also incredibly restrained. She only referred indirectly to these questions by mentioning the Solidarity movement out of which PiS emerged, stating, "We know from that time how important plural societies are, how important an independent judiciary and media are, because then that was all absent."

Prime Minister Beata Szydło, who last year banned any intervention by Brussels or Berlin into domestic Polish politics, did not even respond at first to this concealed rebuke.

Merkel indicated Berlin's readiness to compromise on a

number of formerly controversial issues. Above all, she revised the German government's previous stance on the expansion of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, which is supposed to transport Russian gas direct to Germany and is vehemently opposed by Poland. To date, the German government maintained the position that the pipeline, in which two German companies are involved, was merely a "matter of private business." However, now Merkel declared that the issue should be discussed in a bilateral working group.

This step is even more significant given that the Hungarian government of Viktor Orbán, which collaborates closely with PiS, only recently declared its support for the pipeline project after a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin. The statement prompted considerable anger in the Polish press and strengthened the feeling of Poland's growing isolation within Europe.

Die Zeit drily summarised the joint appearance: "The Chancellor noted the many areas of cooperation, while Szydło mostly nodded in agreement and did not contradict at any point." On the continuation of Russian sanctions in particular, both politicians agreed.

Like many other German newspapers, *Die Zeit* welcomed the chancellor's line in Warsaw and surmised that it would now be possible to maintain more-pragmatic relations with Poland.

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* described the meeting with Kaczyński as a "quiet crisis meeting." In the foreground was the crisis of the EU. Concrete details on this have yet to be released. Polish government circles indicated Kaczyński wanted to present plans to Merkel for a close military alliance and nuclear rearmament, as well as his ideas for a reform of the EU.

The evaluation by the Polish press of the visit was overwhelmingly positive, including both the conservative and liberal media. There is at least currently broad agreement on the need for rapprochement with Germany under conditions of an escalating European crisis and extreme uncertainty about US foreign policy.

The liberal *Gazeta Wyborcza* welcomed the talks between Kaczyński and Merkel. The liberal opposition strongly criticised the deteriorating relations with Germany under PiS from the outset and pushed for a stronger orientation towards Berlin.

In its comment on the meeting, the newspaper, which has been in the lead in the political conflict between the liberal opposition and the government, wrote, “No, this is not a text that Jarosław Kaczyński and his government will attack. Because it is in everyone’s interest for Poland not to lose its valued friends and partners in this extremely uncertain world. Those like German Chancellor Angela Merkel.” In the current situation, Germany was “the only guarantee for stability in the EU and in Europe. ... Tripping up Angela Merkel will not improve our security.”

Germany is by far Poland’s most important trading partner. But the attempts to improve relations on both sides are based above all on the changed international geopolitical situation.

With Donald Trump as president, Washington now openly questions NATO, is threatening trade wars with China, Mexico and Germany, and attacks German preeminence in the EU. The German bourgeoisie is responding to this with a military build-up to assert itself as a world power against the US. In this, the consolidation of the EU and its hegemony in it is of central importance. In this context, Poland plays an important role.

In Poland, the presidency of Trump and the breakdown of international relations within the framework that Warsaw has operated since 1989 have provoked extreme nervousness and even panic. Not only PiS, but also the liberal opposition fear a rapprochement between Washington and Moscow at the expense of the EU and eastern Europe in particular.

The influential conservative newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* wrote in January that the election of Trump posed Poland with a “tragic decision”: it must either orient towards Germany and Europe, or towards its traditional ally, the US. The newspaper suggested that given the threat of an alliance between Moscow and Washington, Germany would be the more important and reliable partner.

At the same time, the Polish bourgeoisie sees itself increasingly isolated due to the exit from the EU of one of its closest allies, Britain. The elections in France are also being followed with concern. The *Gazeta Wyborcza* warned in its comment on Merkel’s visit of an election victory for the far-right National Front under Marine Le Pen, who is backed by the Kremlin.

German and Polish comments both noted that Berlin and Warsaw have an interest in retaining the EU for geopolitical and economic reasons.

Under these conditions, all factions of the Polish bourgeoisie would prefer a new term for Merkel as chancellor rather than a victory by Social Democrat Martin Schulz. In the winter of 2015-2016, as German-Polish relations sharply deteriorated, Schulz was among those who spoke out most aggressively.

At the same time, the Polish bourgeoisie fears that an SPD-led government, like that of Gerhard Schröder, would orient more towards Moscow. It has been no less unsettling to the Polish bourgeoisie that Schulz challenges Trump more directly than Merkel.

In an interview published by the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* shortly before Merkel’s visit, Jarosław Kaczyński stated explicitly that he desired Merkel to continue as chancellor. Asked what would be “so bad” about Martin Schulz, Kaczyński answered, “First of all his stance on Russia.” Secondly, unlike Merkel, he had “expressed [very] anti-Polish” views and is “famous for being uncontrolled, for attacks, for an outcry.”

The PiS leader repeated his long-standing criticism of Germany’s predominant role in the EU and agreed with US President Donald Trump’s statement on this.

In the support of sanctions against Russia and the stationing of German army troops in eastern Europe, Kaczyński saw points of agreement for a German-Polish rapprochement. He sought to downplay the differences over the future organisation of the EU. Kaczyński said that Warsaw currently took the idea of “a two-speed Europe...not seriously.”

Kaczyński made more than clear that any alliance with Germany, which occupied Poland in two world wars, would be based on military rearmament. He appealed for Europe to be strengthened into a nuclear superpower so that the continent could prepare, independently from the US if necessary, to wage war on Russia. “A single nuclear power has to be able to compete with Russia. We are far away from that. But if there was something serious, I would be in favour. Europe would then become a superpower. I would welcome that,” he said.



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