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Anna Kwiatkowska,
Wojciech Konończuk

30.05.2023

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The reconciliation between Poles and Ukrainians has accelerated tremendously. Its existential context has made this a bottom-up, authentic and inclusive process. Although it is still far from complete, the way it is proceeding and the trust that has already accumulated, as well as the security interests that Poland and Ukraine share, offer hope of avoiding the kitsch of reconciliation that we have not been able to get rid of in Polish-German relations. The fundamental lesson from the latter experience should be the realisation that the road to understanding is long and bumpy, and that trust and the ability to manage public expectations are crucial.

Easier with Ukraine than with Germany

Let's start with a brief history. The Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation began much later than the Polish-German reconciliation. Still, at first, it followed the same path: it was based on political gestures and declarations and dialogue among intellectual circles. This is always important – and always insufficient. Initially, this was not accompanied by progress in social relations. At the same time, the infrastructure for building mutual understanding (creating institutions, organising youth exchanges, etc.) significantly diverged from what had been built up in Polish-German relations.

This began to change in 2004 when the Orange Revolution and then the Revolution of Dignity rekindled Polish support for Ukraine. Then there was the Russian aggression in 2014, and finally, the eruption of full-scale war in February 2022. The unprecedented involvement of the Polish state and the public in helping Ukraine triggered an equally unprecedented response from Ukrainians. Even before the war broke out, Poles were among the nations most liked by Ukrainians. However, the polling in recent months shows an incredible increase in these sympathies, to a level of about 85 percent. A similar process is being observed in Poland, where sympathy for Ukrainians has reached levels never before recorded. According to a recent survey,

Polish people's positive attitudes toward Ukrainians are now higher (69.1 percent) for the first time than toward Germans (52.5 percent). At the same time, only 5.6 percent of Poles view Ukrainians negatively, compared to 17 percent who feel that way about Germans.

The infrastructure of social contacts has expanded significantly. About 1.5 million Ukrainian refugees have settled in Poland, and many more have passed through our country. Yet Poland had already become home to some 1.5 million Ukrainian labour migrants even before 2022. Their hard work had made it possible to demolish stereotypes and prejudices on both sides.

The massive increase in Ukrainian sympathy for Poles was because Poland, in their eyes, had proved to be a tried and tested friend during the nation's most challenging ordeal. As a result, Ukrainian society today looks upon the Poles with confidence as a neighbour who, although it has committed historical offenses, has honestly 'repented', and more than 'made up for' its former transgressions.

On the other hand, the Poles share the conviction that the ongoing war is also 'our war,' and that their Ukrainian neighbours are also fighting for them. In this situation, the previously present tensions, mainly of a historical nature, have receded into the background, awaiting peacetime. The desire not to waste this potential to develop true reconciliation in Polish-Ukrainian relations is an entirely natural reflex.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that reconciliation with Ukraine bears a different burden than that with Germany. The Ukrainians are not the main 'culprits' for us, nor are we for the Ukrainians. The Poles and the Ukrainians are nations 'between' Russia and Germany, and these countries bear the laurels of primacy in terms of historical sins. The problems of Poland and Ukraine arising from history are therefore of a lesser calibre than those of Poland and Germany, and so agreement and understanding between the former should be easier to come by.

Reconciliation or 'reconciliation of the elites'?

The process of reconciliation between Poles and Germans has a long standing. It encompasses more than just the post-war period, which was symbolised by the "Letter of Reconciliation of the Polish Bishops to the German Bishops" (1965). For more than thirty years now, we have observed the process taking place between two free societies and states. Undeniably we have had some great successes in the post-transition Polish-German rapprochement. Based on overcoming post-war hatred and the 'fatalism of hostility,' which was an incredible achievement, after 1989 it was possible to agree on a legal fundament, including the key treaty on the recognition of the border. The category of successes includes cooperation in Poland's accession to the European Union and NATO, but also the creation of a network of institutional links and youth exchanges, among other things. And the flourishing economic cooperation between Poland and Germany was and remains the most important and effective.

So why is it still so difficult to agree with recent article by Jarosław Kuisz and Karolina Wigura that "the Poles and Germans have conducted one of the most successful reconciliation processes after World War II"? The answer is hidden in the end of that same sentence: "...and yet the two societies know almost nothing about each other." Since the societies know nothing about each other, what then is this quality of reconciliation? And with whom did it occur? The authors are right that "we need a new multilateral reconciliation and partnership with Germany." But can it be said, as they write, that "the reconciliation took place at the level of the elites"? No, it can't. And that's not just because there is no single 'elite', in either Germany or Poland. Something has gone wrong with the reconciliation between Poles and Germans if the reference point of the emerging new treaty on cooperation and friendship between Poland and Ukraine is the German-French Élysée Treaty and not the 1991 Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighbourship.

The ever-living kitsch of reconciliation

To cite another quote:

“This has created not only a distorted, but also a paradoxical image of Poland in Germany: Poland is a country of cunning traders, car mafiosi, drunks and, of course, clerical anti-Semites: but these anti-Semites, traders and mafiosi are represented exclusively by enlightened, European and pro-German intellectuals...”

These words come from Klaus Bachmann’s brilliant 1994 [sic!] article for the daily newspaper *Rzeczpospolita*, in which the author, then a correspondent for the Austrian daily *Die Presse*, first used the phrase “the kitsch of reconciliation” [Versöhnungskitsch]. Even years later, reading the text is painful because in many places it still shocks with its topicality:

Politicians and intellectuals prefer to talk about cooperation, good neighbourliness, friendship and – by German politicians with particular fondness – reconciliation. Meanwhile, the old stereotypes remain in people’s minds, are supplemented by new ones: and in this way, behind a smokescreen of big words, each thinks what he has always thought about the other [...] The problems between Germans and Poles will not be solved by silence or avoiding sensitive topics, but by lively discussions and disputes [...] Instead of arguing, the Polish Germanophiles and the German Polonophiles reinforce each other in the belief that they love each other, while excluding discussion of any sensitive topics.

To this day, the source of the problems in Polish-German relations is the flood of empty gestures, using those gestures to patch up the differences, and the avoidance of any discussions or attempts to solve real problems. One example of this is the regularly stated German platitude about ‘thinking about the future’ and the will to ‘move forward’ whenever the Poles make any specific demands or requests for clarification or action which does not suit the German side. So, Erika Steinbach is pushing for the creation of the Centre Against Expulsions [Zentrum gegen Vertreibungen], manipulating facts and emotions while doing so?

The German answer: ‘Let’s think about the future!’ The Poles, Lithuanians, and Ukrainians argue about the dangers of the first, then the second Nord Stream pipeline. ‘Let’s not demonise a business project,’ ‘let’s talk about climate policy.’ We don’t like the voting system in the EU Council, and we have a better idea? ‘Let’s not antagonise, let’s move forward!’

There are countless similar examples. Now, this cliché has resurfaced when discussing the consequences of Germany’s dependence on Russia and its military aid to Ukraine, which both the Poles and other countries on the eastern flank see as insufficient to Germany’s potential. Lily Gardner Feldman, an American scholar at Johns Hopkins University and the author of an essential book on reconciliation in German foreign policy, believes that reconciliation always has a root cause. The party initiating reconciliation is driven by a moral premise or by pragmatism (sometimes both). Looking at the past decades, it is hard not to see that in the case of Germany, the drive for reconciliation with Poland was mainly (if not exclusively) pragmatic. The idea was to neutralise the obstacle for Berlin of Germany’s image resulting from its terrible history, while focusing on the future and economic development (to their mutual benefit) – but at the expense of marginalising the past.

However, this did not make the deep crises between Warsaw and Berlin disappear. They stemmed from the Germans’ dismissal, disregard and paternalistic approach towards the Poles. But they also stemmed from a lack of Polish sincerity in conducting this dialogue, which stemmed from a desire to avoid irritations with a neighbour that supported our integration into the EU and NATO. Even when contentious issues were raised, they tended to be downplayed in Germany as an unnecessary impediment to a cooperation which was otherwise developing well. Anyone who wanted deeper discussions or joint analysis was an irritant. As a result, the hopes that Polish-German relations would give a new impetus to the development of the European Union turned out to be naive. No synergy or added value will be created if the partners do not talk and treat each other as partners. Another negative

consequence has been the gradual radicalisation of the language and messages concerning Germany on the Polish political scene.

Added to this was a series of persistent problems, so persistent that there is a fear that they can never be resolved. Not even those people who supported an 'ordinary' neighbourliness, devoid of any emotional or catastrophic overtones, could understand the German state's indifference to its people's acute lack of knowledge about Poland and its history, the marginal presence of Poland in German textbooks (including information about the Polish victims of World War II), the failure to abide by agreements on teaching the Polish language, and the failure to uphold the guarantees of equal rights granted by treaty to the German minority in Poland and the Polish minority in Germany. Only the German belief in the *polnische Wirtschaft* has weakened, due to Poland's economic success.

Also not insignificant was the problem – unresolved, according to the perception of over half of the Polish public – of the lack of compensations, which violated the Polish sense of justice, in line with the belief that after the examination of conscience there should be redemption of guilt. Gardner Feldman believes that in the reconciliation process, "reparations are the first step".

The unused window of opportunity

In the second decade of the 21st century, the financial crisis and the security crisis triggered by the annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbas created new opportunities for German-Polish relations. A new context for the development of their bilateral cooperation seemed to have emerged, as the crises forced fundamental changes in the existing policies of both countries. It could be hoped that their close proximity and membership in the EU and NATO would be prioritised, in competition with their relations and interests with third countries. And that there would not be a repeat of Deauville, where the security architecture of Europe was discussed in the German-French-Russian triangle in

2010; or of Mulino (the Russian army training centre which Germany's Rheinmetall had been building until 2014).

As we know, there was no new opening. Instead of changing course, Germany bet on continuing its policies. Germany's energy transition was based on Russian gas and an uncritical belief in building 'interdependence.' A year after the annexation of Crimea, the agreement to build Nord Stream 2 was signed, and Germany defended it right up until the last days before 24 February 2022. That course could not have been more against Poland's – and, as it soon turned out, Europe's – best interests. In turn, regardless of their political views, the Poles had the deep conviction that their German neighbours were pursuing policies that undermined Polish security. In the case of Polish-Ukrainian relations, the exact opposite process has been taking place: the Ukrainians, who have been on the front line since 2014, are strengthening Polish security with their heroic defence.

Don't make the same mistakes

For Germany and Poland, it is necessary to consider, at the very least, how to rectify the mistakes that have been made. For us, it is especially important not to repeat them in the process of cooperation and reconciliation with the Ukrainians. The following list is just an excerpt of what should be done.

First, let's take each other seriously. Our German partners, though perhaps not entirely consciously, have had a clear message for us over the years: what the Polish side is calling for and what is important to it, we will consider seriously only when the issue is on a knife edge, or when a serious conflict arises.

Second, let's actively work to expand our knowledge. Let's not just motivate our partner to subsidise the study of the Polish language and revise textbooks, but let's also invest Polish taxpayer's money in the better promotion of Polish culture and history. Let's also invest our resources and forces in conducting deep analyses of our partner's politics, culture and economy. The asymmetry between the significant number of Polish scholars of Germany

(in all fields) and the handful of German scholars of Polish is striking.

Third, let's spread the knowledge we have learned about ourselves. The widespread thesis that Polish-German problems are caused by our different historical sensitivities is false. The anti-Polish reflexes observed in Germany are the result of an elementary lack of knowledge. The intellectuals also show off their ignorance, confusing the Warsaw uprisings or perorating about the 20 million Russians killed in the war, or the fact that Russia is a more important trading partner than Poland. The fight against anti-Polish resentment in Germany is also a fight against stereotypes – including those described in Bachmann's text, which are unfortunately still present. Are there no longer any German politicians fighting against the anti-Semitism, neo-fascism and nationalism extant in Poland, despite the absence of their symptoms in our country to the extent that they were (and still are) present in Germany? It is not in Poland where refugee shelters have been burning, nor in Poland where synagogues need armed protection from possible attacks.

Fourth, let's diversify and update our sources of knowledge. Germans most often have a very narrow view of what is happening in Poland because they have been using the same sources of information for years. And every now and then they are surprised – either by the victories of specific political parties in Poland, or by the direction of the discourse on some topic. Bachmann put it aptly in 1994:

“Who represents Poland in German newspapers? Andrzej Szczypiorski and Adam Michnik. Who does every German envoy have to interview to qualify as a Polonophile? Jacek Kuroń, and possibly still Tadeusz Mazowiecki. All these people – judging by the last elections – represent about 10 percent of the Polish population, and right now, they are in the opposition. The intellectuals who represent the remaining 90 percent – including the ruling coalition – the German reader has not yet

heard anything about them...”

Just add a few more intellectual circles, and the message remains true today. This is a trap that we will have to avoid in Polish-Ukrainian relations.

Fifth, it should be considered the failure of the Poles and the Germans that this resentment is so easily exploited. Although surveys indicate that Germans still enjoy sympathy in Poland, the question of why it is so easy to provoke anti-German reflexes should be considered by the Poles and their German partners. How is it possible that – after thirty years of hard work by many German foundations and institutes, the millions of D-Mark and euros spent, and with such a strong pro-German lobby (let's hope we can someday create a similarly pro-Polish group in Germany) – it is so easy to provoke anti-German agitation in Poland?

We have reached a point in Polish-German relations where we would be happy with small steps in individual areas of cooperation, without hoping for a grand vision of great reconciliation and friendship in strategic cooperation. At worst, we are in danger of slipping into indifference. This solves nothing; but it is still better than outright hostility.

Lessons for Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation

Let's return to Polish-Ukrainian relations. The reconciliation between Poles and Ukrainians remains unfinished, but its future prospects are optimistic. Poland has the kind of social capital on the Dnieper (as Ukraine also does now on the Vistula) that Germany has never had in Poland. The two to three million Ukrainians living in Poland are creating a huge web of inter-societal connections, for reasons including the greater subjectivity which Ukrainians enjoy in Poland compared to the 'invisible' millions of assimilated Poles in Germany. It may be hoped that reconciliation will be easier when Ukraine's defensive war is finally over, because both countries – and crucially, both peoples – will have built up a huge capital of trust, a trust forged in the most difficult, truly existential moments.

There are important lessons for Polish-Ukrainian relations from the problems which have arisen with Polish-German reconciliation.

First, let's treat each other as partners, as this will only strengthen the trust we have accumulated. We remember from recent years both the arrogance of Ukrainian elites – symbolised by the words of one former foreign minister that "Poland is a territory between Ukraine and Germany" – but also the Polish belief in their own superiority. Ukraine's new assertiveness, spurred by the war, will also be challenging.

Second, complex issues should not be swept under the rug, and sensitive topics should not be excluded. Dialogue without sincerity will not solve anything. Discussions about Volhynia, the most difficult topic in Polish-Ukrainian reconciliation, will undoubtedly return. One hopes, however, that a more confident Ukraine – more confident because victorious – will have more courage and more critical historians who will be able to look boldly into the dark pages of its history.

Third, we must be patient, as the reconciliation process in each case will need a long time to mature. It is worth nurturing: starting, for example, by respecting burial sites, building or restoring memorial crosses, and setting up plaques (on both sides of the border) which bear honest inscriptions.

Fourth and finally, it is necessary to accept that there are and always will be disputes of different natures between any neighbours, even the best of them, arising from the current state of their relationship. It will be easier to discuss these matters without historical baggage.

Finally, let's return to Lily Gardner Feldman, who argues that the process of reconciliation includes the development of friendly relations, empathy and trust. If we use these categories, it is easy to conclude that the Polish-German reconciliation process has only partially succeeded in the first two categories. According to a recent IBRIS survey, only 20 percent of Poles believe that Germany is friendly toward Poland, which marks a significant regression. Meanwhile, trust has not been built between the nations. But we can't afford

to just spread our hands in helplessness because too many contemporary challenges await us in a rapidly changing world.

abweisbaren Oppositionspflicht entzieht, weil auch das Tun und Unterlassen von Ministern, Ministerpräsidenten, Spitzenbeamten, Parlamentariern – v.a. Energie- und Wirtschaftspolitikern, und ja, auch einer Kanzlerin aus ihren Reihen zumindest Gegenstand von Befragungen und Untersuchungen sein werden, wäre unverzeihlich.

Wojciech Konończuk is the Director of Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw

Anna Kwiatkowska is Head of Department for Germany and Northern Europe at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW) in Warsaw

Zentrum Liberale Moderne
Reinhardtstraße 15
10117 Berlin
Germany

+49 (0)30 - 13 89 36 33
info@libmod.de
www.libmod.de