

Mehr Akzeptanz und Sympathie

Deutschland und die Deutschen in den Augen der Polen 1999–2005. Ergebnisse einer repräsentativen Umfrage

Stephan Raabe

Executive Summary

In November 2005, the Polish Institute for Public Affairs conducted a representative opinion poll to find out what image the Poles have of their neighbouring country, Germany, and the Germans themselves. The poll addressed 1005 individuals aged over 18. It was designed to trace developments after 1999, when a similar study had been conducted.

Poland's accession to the EU did not lead to an increase in direct contacts between Poles and Germans. Many Poles have relatives or acquaintances in Germany, but only a few number Germans among their friends. Only the better educated may have more contacts.

The first thing that Poles still associate with Germany is their common history, especially the Second World War. Next comes a list of what Poles consider German characteristics, namely industry, ability to organize, discipline, and neatness, and the idea that Germany is a country of prosperity, material abundance, and high-quality goods and services. Among Poles with a low level of education, the image of Germany is dominated by the Second World War. The reason for this may either lie in the current lively debate on how to deal with the past or in the German plan to build a centre against expulsion, which more than half the Poles disapprove of.

In the eyes of the Poles, typical German characteristics include, besides organizational talent, entrepreneurial spirit, modernity, self-confidence, education, and industry. In contrast, emotional and moral competences such as religiosity, honesty, friendliness, and tolerance are considered less typical. All in all, Polish stereotypes about Germany have been stable within the last few years.

The Poles' view of themselves is ambivalent. On the one hand, most Poles consider themselves more religious, more open, and more friendly than their German neighbours; on the other, they regard themselves as less well organized, less self-confident, and less modern. In Poland, it is believed that work is well organized in Germany, where you find prosperity and a functioning welfare state. The attraction of these German hallmarks, which are seen as the state's politico-economic foundations, seem unbroken.

Similar to 1999, the majority of the Poles, albeit with a decreasing tendency, consider themselves different from the Germans in many respects. Despite this difference, the approval ratings of the people living in the neighbouring country to the west have risen, so that the distance between the two nations seems to be diminishing. However, the Poles also believe that the sympathy with which they meet their neighbours is by no means on a level with the sympathy they themselves receive from the Germans. While the Poles do not like the Germans as much as the French or the Americans, they still like them better than the Russians or Ukrainians.

More than three quarters of the Polish population regard German-Polish relations as good. Apparently, most Poles keep their distance from overheated issues, showing that there is a gap between the attitudes of the population and those of mainstream politicians and experts. A large majority of the Poles believe that their own country should make cooperation and compromise their most important task in its relations with Germany rather than insist on its

own interests. This opinion is shared even by voters of the PiS, the ruling party, whose attitude towards Germany tends to be critical. Most Poles expect relations with their western neighbour to improve once the PiS assumes power.

The gap between the friendly image of Germany held by the Polish population and the rather reserved image held by Polish politicians may be due to the fact that German-Polish relations are becoming increasingly close and institutionalized at the societal level. Moves to improve these relations further include frequent meetings between politicians, opening the German labour market to Poles, waiving German claims to property in Poland, increasing mutual investments, cooperating in the fields of science and culture, intensifying youth exchange, spreading knowledge about each other, and the symbolic recognition by the Poles that the expulsion of Germans was an injustice.

The Poles are convinced that their partner, Germany, is of great importance – economically as well as politically and militarily. The only country, if any, which they rank above Germany is the US. On the other hand, they also place great emphasis on economic cooperation, where Germany occupies the first rank. Most Poles also think that Germany is quite capable of promoting cooperation and settling disputes within Europe.

Berlin's Russian policy is criticized throughout. The majority of the Poles are concerned about the German-Russian gas pipeline leading through the Baltic Sea – even more concerned than they are about the centre against expulsion which is planned in the German capital. However, their stance on the pipeline does not impair the Poles' conviction that Germany is to be counted among the circle of their own genuine allies.

The transformation of 1989/90 led to a radical change in the Poles' views about Russia and Germany. Since then, the majority of the Poles have been looking towards Moscow with growing concern. The collapse of communism and Poland's accession to the EU are highlights of a development which is anything but complete. Yet even Germany is still perceived as a threat by some, albeit mainly in economic and less in political or military terms. Although both Germany and Poland are members of the NATO and the EU, their mutual trust is evidently fragile. This also shows in the negative attitude of most Poles towards any increase in Germany's influence in Europe and the world.

What is more, the Baltic Sea pipeline is probably the reason why many Poles are anxious about a German-Russian rapprochement. Apparently, the shadow of a threat towards their own nation by another Rapallo does exist and leads them to believe that, in the end, Poland does not really have any genuine allies on the continental and global stage.

By way of conclusion, it may be said that the Polish society is basically interested in good relations with Germany and its citizens, although few Poles believe that the Germans harbour any goodwill toward them that is worth mentioning. Presumably, the relationship with Germany is perceived as a partnership without emotional resonance. Nevertheless, the Poles view their western neighbour as a firm ally which, as a matter of fact, should met with an attitude not of confrontation but of cooperation and partnership.