

TOWARDS A CIVIL SOCIETY-BASED FOREIGN POLICY: THE FUTURE OF CZECH-GERMAN AND POLISH-GERMAN RELATIONS?

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Abstract

Germany's size, geographical location, and influence in the EU means its politics have significant implications for Poland and Czechia. The current geopolitical environment, as well as domestic developments within Germany, offer various opportunities for the governments of Poland and Czechia to deepen relations with one of their most important partners. In this context, this paper takes an in-depth look at areas for bilateral development in Czech-German and Polish-German relations. First, official German speeches and debates are analysed to build a picture of how Czechia and Poland are conceptualised in German foreign policy. Then, in the main part of the analysis, the potential of different specific formats and policy areas for pursuing deeper bilateral relations are discussed. The analysis draws on interviews with a range of think tank experts, civil society actors, and diplomats. Finally, policy recommendations are made for the development of Czech-German and Polish-German relations.

INTRODUCTION

Now is a crucial time for Poland and Czechia to assess their bilateral relationships to Germany, a country which is not only a neighbour, but a highly influential political and economic partner. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 not only increased international attention on the region of Central and Eastern Europe, but also prompted a period of reflection on and critique of German foreign policy both domestically and abroad. German politicians acknowledged the repeated failures to take seriously the concerns in Central European and Baltic states. Since the invasion, they have also praised Poland and Czechia in particular for the military and humanitarian aid provided by their governments and societies. The Weimar Triangle has been reactivated and Chancellor Olaf Scholz repeatedly declared Poland and Germany to be two of Ukraine's biggest supporters. Meanwhile, the Ringtausch of munitions between Germany and Czechia is an example of a successful military cooperation initiative. The context for the cooperation between Germany and its allies in Central Europe has thus radically changed.

The war in Ukraine is not the only current political context in which Polish-German and Czech-German relations are particularly salient. The performance of the right-wing AfD party in the recent German state elections and opinion polls is a source of great domestic debate and concern. The AfD has repeatedly declared its support for intensifying partnerships with the V4 countries, which it sees as ‘standing for a free Europe, the defence of traditional Western values, prosperity, and national sovereignty.’ To prevent these narratives from steering the German discourse on the V4 countries individually or as a group, it is important for the Polish and Czech governments to build constructive relations with the mainstream German parties and prevent the sidelined and highly problematised AfD from monopolising the discussion on deepening relations in the region.

Most pressingly, the upcoming elections in Germany are a chance for Poland and Czechia to start laying the foundations for a new phase of bilateral relations with the new German government. The two countries can and should begin to prepare for the German election outcome, set a clear agenda for relations with Germany, and identify the best formats through which to pursue relations with the new government. The current political environment, both internationally and within Germany, thus offers various opportunities for the governments of Poland and Czechia. This paper argues that there are two steps that need to be taken in any initiative to develop bilateral relations with Germany:

- 1) Understand the **key features and priorities of German foreign policy** towards Poland and Czechia. This will improve communication by contextualising German partners’ positions on certain policy issues, and help Czech and Polish actors to prioritise policy areas which German partners are likely to be receptive to.
- 2) Make **selective** and **strategic** use of existing and new formats to approach bilateral relations in a **policy-specific** way. This means carefully selecting the formats and actors in the field of Czech-German or Polish-German relations which are most appropriate for pursuing cooperation in a certain policy area, based on factors including expertise, resources, networks, and availability. Once the most suitable format(s) has/have been selected, bilateral cooperation can then take place more constructively and efficiently than if a less suitable format was chosen for the policy area in question.

The following analysis addresses these two steps in turn. First, official German speeches and debates are analysed to build a picture of how Czechia and Poland have typically been conceptualised in German foreign policy since 2004. Then the potential of a range of formats and policy areas for cooperation is discussed. The empirical background for this discussion is a series of conversations with experts from both civil society and politics. Finally, the paper makes specific policy recommendations for government and civil society actors in Czechia and Poland. These include pursuing closer links with German political parties and parliamentary groups, promoting media cooperation and networking, and capitalising on the border regions as spaces to develop bilateral relations.

THE GERMAN DISCOURSE ABOUT POLAND AND CZECHIA

An analysis of speeches, press releases and parliamentary debates by German politicians revealed four key narratives used to characterise Poland and Czechia at the diplomatic level. Since their EU accession in 2004, both Poland and Czechia have been incorporated into German **narratives about European unity, but also diversity** (i.e. the idea that enlargement strengthened the EU by bringing in countries which belonged in Europe and which brought with them different historical experiences and perspectives). Czechia and Poland are spoken about primarily as fellow EU member states, whether this is in terms of popular opinion (pro-EU sentiment in Poland and euroscepticism in Czechia), or the political landscape and its implications for Germany/the EU (for example, the discussions of the Polish PiS government's rule of law disputes with the EU, and the Czech government's early decision to send tanks to Ukraine following Putin's full-scale invasion in 2022¹). While German spokespeople acknowledge the different positions and threat perceptions that exist on a number of issues, Poland and Czechia are presented as partners and friends with whom constructive dialogue is possible.²

Historical narratives addressing the commemoration [↗ LINK](#) of the Second World War and the fall of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe feature to varying degrees in German official rhetoric about Poland and Czechia. Polish suffering in the Second World War and the perpetration of the Holocaust on Polish soil continue to form an active part of Polish-German relations.³ In recent years, history has not played such a key role in Czech-German diplomatic relations, but rhetorical recognition of the National Socialist past and expressions of gratitude for the Czech people's resistance to Communism have an important symbolic function.⁴ Engaging with shared history thus plays an important role in supporting and routinising the diplomatic relations between Germany and its partners.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the German discourse about Central Europe has naturally become more **security focused**. German representatives have rhetorically acknowledged that the threat perceptions of the Polish and Czech governments were justified. Poland and Czechia's military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine – particularly in taking in Ukrainian refugees – continues to be recognised in Germany.⁵ Poland's security role is much more strongly emphasised than that of Czechia, partly due to its size, and partly due to the renewed emphasis on the Weimar Triangle [↗ LINK](#) as a symbol of European solidarity. Nevertheless, the German government's response to the invasion has been criticised in Poland and Czechia, at both the political and societal level. This is reflected in Donald Tusk's pursuit of closer ties with the Baltic and Nordic states [↗ LINK](#), and demonstrates the need for an improved security dialogue and improved agenda-setting in Czech-German and Polish-German relations.

A final narrative frequently evoked by German representatives is that of **civil society and intersocietal ties**. In the case of Czechia, organisations such as the Czech-German Fund for the Future and the Czech-German Discussion Forum are cited in German speeches as examples of cooperation and dialogue beyond the diplomatic level. Youth and student exchange programmes are also mentioned by politicians as key interfaces outside the political sphere. Furthermore, while the PiS party was in power in Poland, German representatives spoke of civil society as a stabilising factor which maintained close relationships between Poles and Germans

even when intergovernmental relations were deteriorating. This emphasises the relevance of looking at civil society actors in the context of deepening bilateral relations more generally, and is investigated in detail in the second part of the analysis.

CHANNELS OF COOPERATION: INTEGRATING CIVIL SOCIETY AND FOREIGN POLICY

Having established the key narratives from the German perspective, this paper now turns to the wide variety of actors involved in Czech-German and Polish-German relations. The following findings are drawn from 20 conversations with representatives from academic, civil society, media, and policy circles, which were carried out in Prague from October to December 2024.

Formats

- The international offices of the **German political foundations (*Stiftungen*)** are key bridges not only between Germany and its neighbours, but also between politics and civil society. As well as being funded by the German government, they work with the German embassy and visiting politicians from Germany, and are considered sources of expert and long-term knowledge about the country or region they focus on. Due to their affiliation to German political parties, they have better access to the political sphere than many other organisations. However, cross-party cooperation depends on ideological alignment, so not all Czech and Polish parties have ties to one of the *Stiftungen*.⁶
- There are a number of think tanks with expertise in Czech-German and Polish-German relations. The cooperation between think tanks in Germany, Poland and Czechia is also strong; examples include their collaboration on research projects and attendance at conferences. However, the conclusions and recommendations from these interactions are not always communicated to decision makers, which means that knowledge and expertise sometimes remain within relatively closed academic circles.⁷ Crucially, the exchange between think tanks in Germany and Central Europe remains relatively stable even when the political landscape of one of the countries changes or intergovernmental relations deteriorate.⁸
- The **Czech-German Fund for the Future** focuses on people-to-people connections, and financially supports a range of cultural, historical and social projects. It has also served as a blueprint for other organisations working in similar areas.⁹ By laying foundations for democratic values and bilateral understanding in Czech and German societies, it can support relations at the political level.¹⁰ The fund is comparable to the Foundation for German-Polish Cooperation, which also awards grants for bilateral projects and works with institutions from both countries.

- Exchange programmes between Germany and its neighbours Poland and Czechia take a variety of forms, from the EU Erasmus ^{LINK} scheme to specific exchanges such as the International Parliamentary Scholarships ^{LINK} at the German Bundestag. Opportunities for citizens to spend time in partner countries help to build linguistic and cultural understanding at the societal and political level.¹¹ However, as is common in bilateral relations, there are asymmetries.¹² For example, movement from Poland to Germany is much more common than movement from Czechia to Germany, while proficiency in German is more common among Czech and Polish people than the other way round. The existing exchange programmes also face challenges in terms of demand and resources.¹³ The dominance of English as a second language means it is important to raise awareness of the benefits of learning the languages of neighbouring countries.¹⁴

 - Poland and Czechia continue to be part of the Visegrád Four constellation, though this is not currently a productive diplomatic format through which to pursue relations with Germany.¹⁵ At the civil society level, however, the Visegrád Fund remains active. The fund has supported a limited number of projects which address Germany-V4 relations since 2005, although Germany is not a primary partner for such projects.¹⁶ Nevertheless, in supporting civil society and researchers in the V4 countries, the Visegrád Fund can support actors which may be involved in bilateral cooperation with Germany.
- In addition to civil society-based organisations, there are also intergovernmental formats with which civil society actors can and should engage to share their expertise.
- The parliamentary groups (*Parlamentariergruppen*) of the German Bundestag pursue dialogue at the political level, but can benefit from input and agenda-setting from other actors. Currently there is a **German-Polish Parliamentary Group** and a **Parliamentary Group for Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary** in the German Bundestag. However, in response to concerns about the leadership of the latter, a new **German-Czech Parliamentary Forum** has recently been founded. This is a more promising format due to its constructive and committed leadership and bilateral focus, and should be engaged with by politicians and other actors on both sides.¹⁷

 - There are a number of policy area-specific regional forums such as the Polish-German Economic Forum and the Polish-German Legal Forum, as well as the relatively new Czech-German Regional Forum ^{LINK}, which is attended by a range of actors from politics and civil society. Although these formats address regional rather than national cooperation, they are crucial opportunities for networking, exchange and agenda-setting which can then be communicated to the national level.¹⁸

FORMATS PLUS POLICY AREAS

Bilateral cooperation formats are not ‘more’ or ‘less’ suitable *per se*, but rather, their suitability should be judged with reference to a specific policy area. Throughout the interviews, five policy areas for potential cooperation were identified.

There is a need to use the new **security and defence** environment to capitalise on the potential for further security cooperation between Germany, Poland and Czechia, and improve dialogue to align goals and threat perceptions. Security does not only refer to military threats including the war in Ukraine. Germany, Poland and Czechia could also cooperate to increase awareness and resilience regarding **disinformation**.¹⁹ At the bilateral level, the sources of information used by the **media** when reporting on partner countries are crucial. For example, Czech newspapers often receive their information about Germany through press agencies rather than correspondents. The quality of reporting about partner countries is a crucial area that should be improved in order to build mutual awareness and understanding of attitudes and policy positions.²⁰

Education and youth exchange can stabilise bilateral relations.²¹ Language learning is also crucial, but asymmetry in cultures of going abroad for work and study needs to be considered, and more resources are needed. Awareness of **shared history and commemoration** can also support positive bilateral engagement and create constructive foundations for cooperation in other areas. While discussions of reparations and responsibility are ongoing between Germany and Poland, the Czech-German case is no longer so politically loaded and has moved into the sphere of cultural and historical dialogue.²²

Issues relating to the **border regions** must be addressed to lessen the practical and psychological barriers to cross-border cooperation.²³ While these issues themselves are specific to the border regions, the solutions and cooperation formats can become blueprints for national cooperation initiatives.²⁴

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLAND AND CZECHIA

- The war in Ukraine is a common security interest and should be engaged with on a bilateral level to support EU-wide and NATO responses. This should take the form of military and logistical cooperation, with the Czech-German *Ringtausch* as a successful model, but there should also be more emphasis on ongoing dialogue (for example, within existing institutions such as the Czech-German Strategic Dialogue) to crystallise common goals and visions, and find new areas for cooperation.
- The Czech and Polish governments should prepare for the upcoming (and future) German elections by building ties with German political parties. Two potential channels for this are the German party-affiliated political *Stiftungen* (if there is alignment with Czech or Polish parties) and the Czech-German Parliamentary Forum/Polish-German

Parliamentary Group. Political and civil society actors in Czechia should mobilise to build ties with the Czech-German Parliamentary Forum, as it offers a more productive bilateral channel than the problematic Parliamentary Group for Slovakia, Czechia and Hungary in the German Bundestag. Expressing interest and initiative with regard to this new forum is a way of setting the tone for the next German administration and placing Czech-German relations higher on the agenda. Cross-party ties should also be developed to prevent Germany's relations with Poland and Czechia from being 'captured' by the AfD in the German context. Current polls indicate that building ties with the CDU/CSU should be prioritised in the lead-up to the 2025 German elections.

- While the existing cooperation formats may be predominantly bilateral, the EU dimension of Czech-German and Polish-German relations should still be considered. Bilateral forums should, where appropriate, be used to improve understanding and set common agendas at the EU level, and EU and bilateral relations should not be treated as separate spheres. Interaction between regional, national and European actors should be improved by encouraging attendance at bilateral events at least once per year.
- Actors in the border regions should be supported at the national level, and regional initiatives should be treated as opportunities to develop bilateral relations. The Czech-German Regional Forum should be used as a blueprint format for both the Czech and the Polish case. Furthermore, regional cooperation should be further institutionalised in the form of Czech-German and Polish-German regional committees.²⁵
- Youth exchange programmes and opportunities to spend time in neighbouring countries should be financially supported and promoted by governments and funding organisations. This should become an institutionalised feature of Czech-German and Polish-German relations to ensure the longevity of projects. The border regions should be a starting point for such projects, and emphasis should be placed on the benefits of learning the language of the bordering country in addition to learning English.
- Bilateral Czech-German and Polish-German news associations should be established to connect journalists and media companies. A database could also be established to provide an overview of and contact details for actors participating or specialising in Polish, German and/or Czech politics. These strategies can help to develop networks, share information and sources, and improve mutual understanding.

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ENDNOTES

¹ In this example, a member of the German parliament from the CDU/CSU used Czechia's decision as a fellow EU member state to send tanks to Ukraine as a way of applying pressure to Chancellor Olaf Scholz's slower response to the invasion.

² For example, see the following quote by Angela Merkel after intergovernmental consultations with the Polish government in 2012: *'I can say that our bilateral relations are friendly and close, and that is also reflected in the fact that we find common solutions when it comes to projects where our initial positions differ.'*

³ One of many examples of this is the following quote by Frank-Walter Steinmeier in a 2015 speech about Polish-German reconciliation: *'And today we are still grateful for the incredible magnanimity with which our Polish neighbours extended the hand of friendship after reunification, and cleared the way for the Friendship Treaty.'*

⁴ Unresolved historical issues continue to cause controversy ^{LINK} in German-Polish relations, while in the case of Czechia there are no serious calls for reparations or other forms of compensation at the political level. The last time historical tensions with Germany resurfaced on the national political stage in Czechia was during the 2013 presidential election campaign ^{LINK}.

⁵ For example, see the following statement by an SPD member of the Bundestag in a parliamentary debate in 2022: *'3 million refugees have already fled Ukraine. Our neighbours Poland, Romania, Czechia, Slovakia and Moldova are performing an immeasurable logistical and humanitarian service by initially receiving these people.'*

⁶ Representatives from Prague offices of German political foundations.

⁷ A representative from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a Czech academic.

⁸ A representative from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs; a representative from the Visegrád Fund.

⁹ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future; a representative from the Prague office of a German political foundation.

¹⁰ This point was emphasised by several actors from different organisations.

¹¹ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future; a journalist.

¹² A Czech academic.

¹³ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future; a discussion at the Czech-German Regional Forum.

¹⁴ A representative from the Prague office of a German political foundation.

¹⁵ There was broad consensus on this point among representatives from think tanks and the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹⁶ A representative from the Visegrád Fund.

¹⁷ A Czech academic.

¹⁸ Observations from the Czech-German Regional Forum; a representative from the Prague office of a German political foundation.

¹⁹ Representative from Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs

²⁰ A representative from the Prague office of a German political foundation.

²¹ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future.

²² Several experts, including representatives from the Czech Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Czech-German Fund for the Future, think tanks, and the media, emphasised that history is no longer a source of controversy or tension in Czech-German intergovernmental relations.

²³ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future.

²⁴ Observations from the Czech-German Regional Forum.

²⁵ A representative from the Czech-German Fund for the Future; observations from the Czech-German Regional Forum.