The 25th Anniversary of the Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between Germany and Poland

Close links in the social, political and cultural spheres connect our two countries like never before in our history, and the good German-Polish neighbourhood is an integral part of Europe. This was made possible 25 years ago with the signing of The Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation of June 17, 1991, which was a turning point in our history. Following World War II, the two nations were alien to each other and acted distrustful towards each other. However, today, we exist as good neighbours, and not only due to the geographic location.

The German-Polish Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness was signed in the spirit of historic reconciliation between the two countries and in the conviction that it was needed to break the post-war division of Europe. Germans and Poles agreed in unison that the future of our bilateral relations will be shaped by the unification of the continent. Both sides declared that they would take the responsibility for its success. As the basis for the process of building “a just and lasting peaceful order in Europe,” were universal values, such as respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, rule of law, and respect for human rights.

The indications of the German-Polish agreement were associated with the dramatic experiences during World War II unleashed by Nazi Germany. The political elite, aware of the heavy weight common history represented, took the responsibility for overcoming these tragic experiences. Looking into the future and “the closing of the painful chapters in the history of both nations” was a very difficult task, because the Nazi German crimes of WWII had become a significant part of the historical memory of Poles, casting a deep shadow on their relationship towards the German nation. As a result of the war, millions of Germans had to leave their small homelands. The abandoned land was repopulated by Poles, who in turn, were forced to leave the eastern territories of pre-war Poland. Building the new foundations of the German-Polish post-war relations meant that numerous contradictions and prejudices had to be overcome, and thus underlined the need for dialogue after decades of isolation, silence, propaganda, and distrust. It required a new language of dialogue, a minimum knowledge about each other, and, above all, reciprocity.

We need to keep in mind that communist times in Poland, as well as the division of the German state, were not, in any way, conducive to the building of a genuine rapprochement and understanding between Poles and Germans. A historic opportunity that could benefit the political elites was created at the turn of 1989/1990 with the political changes in Central Europe forming the necessary conditions. On the one hand,
this process was linked to the democratic changes in Poland, and, on the other hand, it was linked to the process of reunification of Germany.

In spite of all the obstacles, a very important job and numerous efforts were made in those difficult years to create a suitable political climate for this historic turning point. We should appreciate the great courage and far-sightedness of all the Poles and Germans who, as early as the 1960s endeavoured to find ways of rapprochement and understanding between the two nations. An important step in this direction was the Eastern Memorandum of the Evangelical Church in Germany, which called upon Germans to accept the consequences of their guilt for World War II and make reparations for the injustices committed. Then, the decisive step was made in Poland by the Catholic Church. It was a letter from Polish bishops to German bishops written in November 1965, aiming for reconciliation. It contained a historical line that read "we forgive and ask for forgiveness." With this letter, the first seeds of reconciliation had been sown. In December 1970, the government of Willy Brandt recognized the Oder-Neisse borderline, and established diplomatic relations between the Federal Republic of Germany and the People's Republic of Poland.

The founding of the "Solidarity" movement in 1980, which targeted freedom, democracy and sovereignty, also contributed to “building solidarity bridges” between the two nations. Its quest for freedom was the inspiration and model for freedom movements throughout Central and Eastern Europe. A man of great courage and reconciliation who played an important role in these changes was also Pope John Paul II.

Recalling the transformation processes in our part of Europe between the years 1989-1990, we need to remember the 1989 historic visit of Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his meeting with Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki. During the Holy Mass in Krzyżowa, Poland, both politicians exchanged “the sign of peace” (“peace be with you”). It was then that the Berlin Wall was overthrown, immediately followed by the reunification of Germany. These processes formed the base for the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, which redefined our relations and determined the direction for further cooperation.

The political benefits for both countries created through the changes were significant. Poland contributed to the reunification of Germany and to the overcoming of the division of Europe, whereas Germany supported Poland’s democratization processes and reforms. Poland backed by Germany gained NATO membership, and later also gained EU membership. The inclusion of Poland into the European Union served as the leading example of how the rapprochement of the two nations affects the process of integration in Europe. On top of that, Poland was incorporated into the Weimar Triangle, discussing a common vision of Europe together with Germany and France.
The political elite was represented by bold and courageous politicians, who felt the responsibility for the shaping of a new European order, and hence paved the path to normalization. Under the new conditions, the German-Polish cooperation began to develop dynamically. Over the years, a multi-level infrastructure of contacts and cooperation has been built between the two countries and societies. It consists of state institutions, local governments, and non-governmental organizations that deal with social dialogue, culture, history, regional cooperation, media, science, and economic markets.

The most important institutions for the bilateral dialogue are: The Foundation for Polish-German Cooperation; The Polish-German Foundation for Science; The German-Polish Youth Partnership and the Youth Meeting House in Krynica, Poland; The Polish-German Reconciliation Foundation; The Krynica Foundation for European Understanding; and The International Youth Meeting Centre in Oswiecim/Auschwitz, Poland. It is worth noting that a total of 2.7 million people from both countries have participated in the youth exchange program over the last 25 years. Additionally, regular meetings, such as the German-Polish Forum and the German-Polish Media Days contribute to these relations. This dense network of contacts exists without mediation of the state. An important role in mutual relations is also played by the German minority in Poland and Poles living in Germany.

The undeniable success of the Treaty is the rapprochement of the Polish and German societies. The social relations, being broad and dynamic, prove that a new stage of German-Polish relations has been reached. Furthermore, the ability to conduct an open and honest dialogue, focusing on our common history, has created mutual trust. It is the Polish and German scientists who get the most credit for their role in creating the proper environment for this dialogue. Thanks to them, both Poles and Germans have learned to solve the problems of the past and to seek compromising solutions for current issues.

The main evidence for how much our relations have changed is the ongoing activity on both sides of the German-Polish border. The Treaty has enabled regional and cross-border cooperation. New links were established at a local level. The success of the local government reform in Poland and the empowerment of local communities triggered tremendous energy and created a basis for building regional awareness and “a local perspective”. This established links between Poles and Germans at the level of their “little homelands,” presenting history and multicultural and multiethnic heritage of these lands. Artists, writers, intellectuals, and journalists play an important role in the dialogue by trying to describe and understand the multi-faceted matters of German-Polish relations and by providing new inspiration and ideas.

The German-Polish partnership is a gift for which we are very grateful. The 25th Anniversary of the Treaty is an excellent opportunity to celebrate this. What happened between our two countries over the period of 25 years—has been dubbed “the miracle of
normality.” It is also a result of the German-Polish Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness, which described and defined the relations between the two states as a unity of values and interests.

Nowadays, a strong cooperation between Germany and Poland is essential in overcoming the challenges faced by Europe. Our political partnership within the European Union strengthens European solidarity and the common responsibility for shaping Europe’s future. In today’s Europe facing so many challenges simultaneously, a close German Polish collaboration is more needed than ever.

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