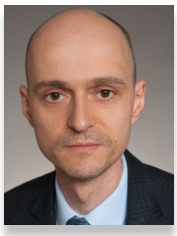

All Quiet On the Western Front. A Critical Assessment of the Polish-German Intergovernmental Consultations of December 1, 2025

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Regardless of the media commentary surrounding the meeting between Polish and German executive officials in Berlin, the talks held at the beginning of the month differed little from those in July 2024. They remained primarily a venue for the routine exchange of information and a secondary tool for managing issues tied to each country's domestic politics. Moreover, the commitments announced during the consultations were marked by an exceptionally high level of generality — broad enough to allow either side to withdraw from previously accepted proposals should the political need arise.

1. The year that passed since the previous round of intergovernmental consultations brought no meaningful change in German-Polish relations. Both the list of contentious issues and the lack of political will to resolve them remained intact. In both capitals, this reluctance was driven either by the risk of domestic political losses associated with addressing a given topic or by the potential gains derived from deliberately avoiding it.

2. The media narrative in Poland ahead of the consultations also remained unchanged, dominated by extreme and polarized voices. Coverage centered on the alleged ambiguity of the German chancellor's[1] stance, proclaimed supposed breakthroughs[2] in bilateral relations — or, just as confidently, their supposed absence[3] — or speculated about an imagined convergence of positions[4]. One concrete decision, effectively omitted from the official communiqué following the December talks[5], was Poland's removal of its Plenipotentiary of the Minister of Foreign Affairs for Polish-German social and cross-border cooperation in 2025 and the abolition of this position within the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs[6]. This move preserved a double institutional asymmetry: an equivalent post still exists on the German side, and the head of Poland's diplomatic mission in Berlin still does not hold the rank of ambassador. This arrangement, beyond its obvious protocol implications, does little to facilitate the effective representation of Polish interests in Germany.

3. The Opportunity Foundation, in its commentary on the 2024 consultations, had already pointed to the limited added value of the exercise[7]. Thus, it is worth highlighting the motivations behind the December 2025 meeting that go beyond the purely normative. Formally, the obligation to hold such consultations stems from the provisions of the 1991 Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation.

4. However, the pivotal factor behind the decision to proceed with the consultations was not the treaty obligation. In fact, it was Poland's absence from current diplomatic formats aimed at shaping proposals for a peace settlement in Ukraine — a gap that had increasingly burdened relations with Germany. The consultations thus became an opportunity to present a set of relatively aligned positions on this issue, while both sides remained acutely aware of how unpredictable the behavior of the U.S. administration could be in its own negotiations with Russia. Therefore, the emphasized convergence of Polish and German views regarding EU support for Ukraine served as a form of public diplomacy beneficial to both partners in the context of their relations with the United States.

5. The externally demonstrated solidarity of Germany and Poland toward Ukraine, as well as the clear designation of Russia as the principal threat to European security, by no means implied an absence of bilateral frictions in the security domain. By early 2025 at the latest, Germany had been seeking to strengthen its role as the dominant actor in shaping NATO's military position in the Baltic region. At the same time, Poland initiated concrete measures to assert its influence in that area, including efforts to

[1] https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/witold-jurasz-donald-trump-jest-najbardziej-proniemieckim-prezydentem-usa-w-historii/94j88xy
[2] https://www.rp.pl/polityka/art43421361-marta-cienkowska-minister-kultury-mamy-przelom-w-relacjach-z-niemcami
[3] https://wpolityce.pl/polityka/747302-merz-wie-ze-moze-ignorowac-prowokacje-intelektualne-tuska
[4] https://pism.pl/publikacje/polsko-niemieckie-konsultacje-miedzyrzadowe-zblizenie-stanowisk-bez-przelomu
[5] https://www.gov.pl/web/premier/wspolna-deklaracja-podsumowujaca-polsko---niemieckie-konsultacje-miedzyrzadowe
[6] https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/prof-krzysztof-ruchniewicz-traci-stanowisko-komunikat-msz/6hmdr5p
[7] https://theopportunity.pl/publikacje/polsko-niemieckie-konsultacje-rzadowe-z-2-lipca-2024-r/

develop its submarine fleet. Poland's selection of a foreign supplier to provide capabilities for the Polish Navy not only signaled an expansion of defense cooperation with Scandinavian countries but also, indirectly, with Anglosphere states. This constituted a clear challenge to Germany's strategic ambitions.

6. Germany's objective during the consultations was therefore to frame potential bilateral defense cooperation with Poland in a way that could serve as leverage over Berlin's external partners. Such cooperation could be easily abandoned should those partners offer concessions. Conversely, it could be rapidly expanded if alternative cooperation frameworks — including those involving the United States — proved unreliable.

7. Identical intentions can be attributed to the Polish side. This was reflected in the passage of the final communiqué announcing the planned conclusion of a bilateral military cooperation agreement in 2026. The communiqu'és somewhat grandiose language regarding the intensification of joint military efforts was also a sign of shared intentions of both countries. The authors 'self-confidence was illustrated by phrases such as: "We will cooperate to ensure that the level of our presence in the NATO Command Structure is adequate to our contribution to NATO deterrence and defence activities." What constitutes "adequacy" in this context remains unclear. However, it is reasonable to assume that the political party represented by Poland's current defense minister would be eager to take responsibility for filling several hundred well-paid civilian posts at NATO Headquarters.

8. Another peculiar passage in the communiqué also seems vague — namely, the claim that "Poland and Germany will contribute with urgency to the development of common standards for the detection and neutralisation of these unmanned aerial vehicles and will rapidly exchange technological knowledge and best practices in this area." This quoted passage would likely be blocked by the security services of both countries, as it effectively implies nothing more than a breach of state secrecy regulations and a potential compromise of each nation's own defense capabilities.

9. An equally ambiguous language style was employed when addressing issues related to broadly understood economic development. The relevant sections of the final communiqué echo the worst patterns drawn from Cold War-era agreements between the secret services of the PRL and the GDR. What was officially drafted to demonstrate that cooperation existed, in fact, was formulated in such a way that every sentence rendered the purported collaboration practically ineffective. For example, the signatories asserted that "(...) it is crucial to reinforce EU competitiveness by simplifying existing legislation [...] and legislative self-restraint." What the statement did not specify, however, was how executive authorities — not only in Poland, but also in other EU member states, including Germany — intended to influence the "self-restraint" of sovereign legislative bodies, either domestically, in another EU country, or at the EU legislative level. Equally elegant yet empty was the declaration that the parties explore the potential for further cooperation in promoting the digital economy.

10. The quintessence of the actual lack of substance in bilateral relations was captured in another sentence of the communiqué, which stated that "(...) we have agreed to enhance the cooperation between the Transport Ministries by setting up a Ministerial Dialogue..." The concept of transport as essential for development already appeared in the 1991 Treaty of Good Neighbourship. If, nearly 25 years later, the relevant ministers are only now expected to initiate a dialogue, and in 2025 the heads of government must convene consultations merely to decide on improvements to a single border crossing (Frankfurt/Słubice), it becomes evident that the implementation of cooperation is largely fictional. No form of ministerial dialogue, nor the almost farcical passages of the statement claiming that "[o]ur work strands also reflect our common ambition to strengthen civilian defence and resilience" can alter that reality. The definition of what constitutes "ambition" remains a private matter for both heads of government.

11. The least surprising, though by no means less offensive or hypocritical toward the Victims, were the provisions and press statements[8] addressing the persistent bilateral issues related to historical policy. German declarations make it clear that the unveiling of a monument to Polish victims of World War II in Berlin, as well as the opening of a memorial site, will be postponed for as long as possible. Knowing German procedural norms, the process of announcing an architectural competition for the monument and appointing a jury is likely to take years. The prospective finishing of the project around the 40th anniversary of the Peaceful Revolution in the GDR and the 90th anniversary of the outbreak of World War II in 2029 would coincide with the Bundestag elections. Those, however, are expected to be won by the AfD. Such a

[8] https://wiadomosci.onet.pl/kraj/znamy-kulisy-negocjacji-z-niemcami-w-sprawie-zadoscuczynienia-ofiarom-wojny-wiemy-co/760nh8h

scenario would almost certainly trigger new controversies, given the party's openly negative stance toward Poland and its historical role as a victim.

12. The mentioned postponement of the monument's construction also serves the interests of Poland's right-wing parliamentary opposition, as does the media's focus on the potential humanitarian payments for surviving victims of the war, namely €10,000. The manner in which this issue was presented in the final statement is, at best, inelegant. Quoting the passage: "The Federal government will examine possibilities of providing further support to Polish victims of the Nazi aggression and the German occupation of Poland 1939-1945." The sentence implies that the analysis could ultimately be unfavorable to these Victims. Regardless of the equally ethically questionable debates over the amount or its conversion into PLN, any payments would allow the Polish government to maintain a firm stance on the matter — demanding higher sums and keeping the issue alive in Poland's public discourse even after the last surviving victim passes away. Claims will inevitably be pursued by heirs. Furthermore, questions remain as to what will happen if the analysis concludes that payments are contingent upon Poland renouncing all other claims related to the consequences of World War II.

13. One important fact is the Polish Prime Minister's media statement, in which he addressed very explicitly the issue of the inadequacy of the 1953 decision by the PRL government to renounce reparations from Germany. Claiming this so explicitly for the first time also allows for the inference that Poland may adopt a firmer stance on compensation and reparations — regardless of domestic political disputes on the matter.

14. No progress should be expected on the issue of cultural property restitution, regardless of the occasional return of lost artifacts to Poland during the meetings. The communiqué following the consultations establishes nothing in this regard, consistently placing the Polish authorities — or individual claimants — in the position of petitioners. Quoting directly: "This [matters of restitutions - TJ] will be assessed on a case by case basis, individually and systematically, considering Polish restitution requests." Regardless of the ambiguity of this paragraph — according to which the victim must request the return of property from the thief — it remains unclear what the evaluation criteria will be and what exactly is meant by the "specifics of each case."

15. In practice, a stalemate can be expected: Poland is likely to assertively retain control over artifacts under its authority to which the German government lays claim, unless Berlin demonstrates good faith in the review of restitution requests.

16. Concerns are also raised by a solution developed in Germany at the end of November, which was announced just prior to the consultations. It pertains to the forced sale of cultural property by persecuted individuals. A special arbitration court was to examine restitution claims for the relevant artifacts. During the proceedings, the plaintiff would be required to demonstrate a direct link between the forced sale and their personal persecution. Critics argue that this approach may effectively serve to protect the holdings of German museums[9].

17. This raises questions not only about the unusually vague language of the communiqué itself, but also about its implementation in the context of the legal solutions recently adopted in Germany and referenced in this document. After all, how can one be certain that the described procedure will not be proposed by the German authorities as a model for analyzing Polish restitution claims?

In conclusion, the value of the consultations remains limited. No progress was made on any of the known contentious issues. Instead, the process created a platform for generating further disputes, such as those surrounding the restitution of cultural property. The implementation of potential security cooperation remains unclear, and its form will depend on the evolution of the conflict in Ukraine. Only after the conflict concludes will it be possible to discuss any potential redefinition of relations between Poland and Germany.

[9] https://www.tagesschau.de/kultur/ns-raubkunst-schiedsgericht-100.html