



No. 101/2012
16'11'12

Institute for Western Affairs
Poznań

Author:
Andrzej Sakson

Editorial Board:
Marta Götz
Radosław Grodzki
Krzysztof Malinowski

The ambivalent image of Poland in Germany

A characteristic feature of the image of Poland and Poles in the German media is its clear dualism. On the one hand, Poland is perceived as a dynamic, modernizing country with a stable economy and democratic structures of power, which is especially visible in comparison to other EU countries experiencing a deep economic crisis. This image of Poland constitutes a contradiction of all negative ideas about the country, the expression of which has so far been the stereotype of *polnische Wirtschaft*, symbolizing disorder, mess and carelessness.

On the other hand, the German public opinion is shocked by the rising wave of thefts, especially carjacking, taking place mainly within the Polish-German borderlands. The theft in June 2010 of a passenger car parked on Dresden Street, which belonged to Thomas de Maizière, the Federal Minister of Internal Affairs, was a spectacular example. After a daring chase on the A4 freeway, the German police captured a 33 year old Pole, Mariusz J., escaping towards the Polish border. The theft of a minibus in October 2012 in the town of Hoppegarten near Berlin was also widely discussed in the German media. It contained 12 coffins with bodies for cremation. The stolen car was found near Jarocin and the undamaged coffins - in a forest not far from Konin. After many bureaucratic perturbations they returned to Germany. The Polish police captured the three perpetrators, citizens of Poland.

According to police statistics, the number of car thefts in Germany increased in the years 2007-2011 (which is when, among others, Poland joined the Schengen Area) - by 22.5% and doubled in Brandenburg and Saxony, which border on Poland (in Brandenburg it increased by as much as 275%). In Berlin, the incidence of car thefts increased by 60%. It is not really a consolation that not only Poles steal cars.

Another expression of the ambivalent image of Poland in Germany is the positively depicted fact that the Poles see their place in Europe in their tightening relationship with Germany. This is confirmed by the newest research from September 2012. It indicated that the majority, about 57%, of the Polish public opinion considers the actions of Chancellor A. Merkel related to “extinguishing” the eurocrisis to be positive. The liking for the Germans is growing as well - 74% of Poles has a positive opinion about the western neighbor. This positive image is slightly darkened by the “Smoleńsk ideology”, the followers of which consider Poland to be the “German-Russian condominium” and accuse the Polish government of being “vassals and flunkies of Berlin”.

This background gives rise to a question concerning the direction of changes in the ideas about Poland and Poles among Germans. If the tendency to long-term growth in the Polish economy and the Pro-German policy of the Polish authorities turn out to be permanent, the attitude of the German elites and media will most likely be positive. However, when it comes to the general German public, the situation becomes more complicated. The Germans still like to emphasize their civilisational advantage over the Poles and will continue to do this. The negative stereotypes concerning Poland and Poles, consolidated throughout generations, turn out to be very persistent. The explanation of this phenomenon comes from the very nature of a stereotype - once it is formed, it is very difficult to change it.

However, research conducted in 2011 indicates that almost half of the Germans (47%) have no opinion on Poland and Poles. Almost one third (32%) stated that they “like the Poles” and 21% that they “don’t like them very much”. Poland still is not very recognizable in Germany, despite the successes of the Polish football players in the German *Bundesliga*.

The modern stereotype concerning Poland and Poles functioning in the German society has a deep historical background. The four images related to Poland, mainly of emotional (and usually negative) nature, are still more or less alive. These are:

- the myth of the German East, suggesting the civilisational superiority of the Germans;
- *polnische Wirtschaft* - symbolizing Polish wastefulness and
- the two myths ascribing the Poles with negative features (*Pole or Polacke* ?) and low social status (*polnische Putzfrau*).

These are the so called long-lasting stereotypes. As Hubert Orłowski noticed: “the essence of long-lasting stereotypes is not that they last or function continuously for a long time, but that they may appear in any suitable moment, when the governing paradigm sets (once more) the norms for their naming and taxation.” It is very likely that if an economic



crisis, similar to that in Greece, took place in Poland, the old prejudice concerning *polnische Wirtschaft* would appear once more with full force.

Researchers place the origin of the expressive and generally negative stereotype of Poland and Poles in modern Germany in the 17th century. The 19th century is the beginning of a planned and deliberate distortion of the image of the eastern neighbor. This is when the negative stereotype of Poland and Poles was born in the minds of many Germans. The Polish state of that time was perceived through the prism of the Polish nobility, lawless and anarchistic. A country of ignorance and religious fanaticism. Its cultural backwardness visible in the cruel fate of a serf. The Poles represented the most negative character traits. This was a deliberate distortion of the image of Poland by the Prussian authorities, who stated that the Poles did not create anything in their history, cannot do anything right and received their culture, wealth and harmony only during the Prussian reign. A nation unable to direct its own fate should, therefore, remain under foreign rule. This point of view dominated in Germany when the independent Polish state was created in 1918. It was considered to be a creation of diplomatic schemes. The Germans insisted that it was only “temporary” and its fall was near. The above-mentioned arguments were eagerly used and supplemented by ideology and propaganda of the national socialist Third Reich.

In the “everyday” perception of the Poles by an average German, there were two most prominent negative features: drunks and thieves. This second feature is mostly associated with stealing cars. The *Polenwitze*, jokes about the Poles, constitute a sublimation of the negative stereotypes. They are disseminated both by the German press and television. They are also easily found on the internet.

The change of the negative stereotypes of Poland and Poles is one of the most important challenges in bilateral relations. While Polish-German agreements and treaties can be decreed and quickly implemented in a favorable political atmosphere, the relations between the societies are resistant to change, because they are mainly based on long-lasting stereotypes. They usually constitute an important part of the collective identity. A very long time and favorable conditions, which could permanently affect social stances, are required to change them.

Andrzej Sakson - Professor ordinarius at the Institute for Western Affairs and the Department of Humanities and Journalism at the Adam Mickiewicz University, sociologist, expert on Polish-German relations, national and ethnic minorities.

This Publication is financed by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education and the Society of the Institute for Western Affairs.

