



## The potential of civil society in Polish-German relations

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In Polish-German relations, civil society initiatives stabilise bilateral relations, especially in the context of controversial issues related to history. The intergovernmental consultations planned for December this year in Berlin will be an opportunity to assess the implementation of the 2024 Polish-German Action Plan, including the creation of a Polish-German civil society parliament. The effects of civil society activity depend on institutional support, including financial support, which currently does not meet the needs.

**Civil society as a pillar of Polish-German dialogue.** The 1991 Treaty on Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation entrusts civil society with the mission of supporting reconciliation and strengthening relations between Poland and Germany. Both countries recognised at the time that stable relations cannot be achieved solely through government decisions and activities, but require the lasting commitment of citizens. This legal basis and political framework served to create conditions for the development of cooperation between civil society actors, both in institutionalised forms, financed and programmed by the authorities, and initiated from the bottom up by civil society. Support for civil society initiatives promoting cooperation between Poland and Germany is the responsibility of the governments of both countries and is mainly implemented through competitions and grant programmes. It remains dependent on political decisions and available financial resources. One of the organisations operating within this system is the Polish-German Youth Office (PNWM), established in 1991, which has involved nearly 3.3 million people in 85,000 projects.

In addition to government-funded initiatives, there is also a smaller network of grassroots initiatives. Thanks to this, the state of Polish-German relations is not solely a reflection of the current state of relations between the two governments. This allows for the continuation of unofficial dialogue, including on issues of memory and historical policy. A good example is the work of the Initiative KZ-Außenlager Lichterfelde in Berlin, which commemorates, among others, Polish prisoners of this camp through joint

educational projects. Civil society activities often combine educational and cultural initiatives, recognising that social awareness of the experiences of both countries is an important asset for the reconciliation process. Thus, the grassroots initiative sector serves as an independent pillar of Polish-German dialogue, influencing politics and cooperation between the two countries. This is particularly important in the current situation, where extreme attitudes towards history, and thus towards cooperation, are becoming more widespread.

**Limitations of cooperation.** However, the potential of civil society is not fully exploited in Polish-German relations. The challenge lies in the scattered nature of the initiatives and the lack of a permanent body that could coordinate them and present recommendations to both governments, such as in the area of financing. This often leads to both fragmentation of activities and duplication of efforts. Systemic coordination was also hampered by the abolition of the position of Polish Plenipotentiary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for Polish-German social and border cooperation in mid-2025, a year after its establishment (a similar position of Coordinator for German-Polish social and border cooperation has existed within the German administration since 2004).

Insufficient funding is also a problem. This limits the scale and scope of projects and hinders their long-term planning. An example is the PNWM (German-Polish Youth Office), which supports grassroots social initiatives. Germany allocates €7 million per year to this, while Poland increased its contribution to approximately €5 million in

2024 (previously it was €4 million). Despite increases in contributions on both sides and the introduction of lower project funding rates by the PNWM, the funds earmarked for 2025 – according to information from the PNWM – were already fully allocated by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development in April this year. Such early exhaustion of funds demonstrates the demand for Polish-German projects.

**Opportunities for development.** At the level of institutionalised cooperation, the most immediate challenge is to implement [the Polish-German Action Plan](#) adopted following last year's intergovernmental consultations. One of its proposals is to establish a Polish-German civil society parliament within the existing cooperation structures, under the patronage of the Polish Plenipotentiary and the German Coordinator. Although the plan does not specify the structure or functioning of this body, the regularly meeting forum would consist of representatives from agreed organisations. The parliament would enable the systematic consideration of the social perspective in intergovernmental relations, ensure continuity of action regardless of political changes, and respond to contemporary challenges in Polish-German relations. To date, there has been no real progress in establishing these structures, partly due to institutional complexities, including the lack of a Polish representative.

The pace of development of civil cooperation is slow, following the period of political stagnation between 2019 and 2023, when there were no Polish-German intergovernmental consultations. This is highlighted, among others, in the January manifesto of the Copernicus Group, an informal expert forum established in 2000 as a project of the German Institute for Polish Affairs and the Krzyżowa Foundation for European Understanding. It calls for a review of the 1991 Treaty and the development of new legal and institutional instruments to strengthen the role of civil society in bilateral relations.

**Conclusions and prospects.** Since 1991, Polish-German relations have developed a solid foundation for civil society cooperation, which constitutes capital for the development of relations, despite the heavy legacy of World War II. However, the lack of specific and long-term mechanisms may lead to only superficial dialogue between the two countries and societies. The lack of institutional tools means that, among other things, valuable grassroots initiatives do not translate into lasting political solutions. This, in turn,

creates the risk that civic cooperation will be reduced to an episodic role, even though in fact it is a significant complement to state diplomacy.

The Polish-German intergovernmental consultations scheduled for December this year in Berlin may strengthen the institutional role of civil society in bilateral relations, provided that the mechanisms envisaged in the Polish-German Action Plan, such as the creation of a Polish-German civil society parliament, are effectively implemented. In addition, it is necessary to ensure long-term financing for civic initiatives. Poland could suggest the creation of a participatory fund with co-financing from both countries. Grassroots projects would receive funding from donors in both countries, and the governments would supplement this funding proportionally, e.g. in relation to their social contribution. The fund would increase the scale of activities and social engagement, and the distribution of funds would allow support to be tailored to the real needs of civil society. Meanwhile, limited funding for civic projects may, in the long term, lead to a weakening of support for grassroots initiatives for good neighbourly relations, which at the level of official contacts are constantly exposed to changing priorities resulting from current politics.

In turn, the creation of a Polish-German civil society parliament could provide a framework for the permanent inclusion of citizens' voices in decision-making processes. The parliament could not only develop specific recommendations, including on financing mechanisms that could form the basis for a solution to be implemented by the governments of both countries, but also actively participate in the management of the participatory fund, monitoring its functioning and the effectiveness of the allocated funds. Strengthening civil society through the creation of such a parliament would benefit Poland by helping build and maintain good neighbourly relations.

The further development of relations between the two countries – taking into account the role of civil society – would facilitate the restoration or creation of a new position to replace the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Plenipotentiary for Polish-German social and border cooperation. The lack of such an institution hinders the coordination of activities on the Polish side and limits the possibilities for cooperation with the German Coordinator. In practice, this weakens the institutional basis for civil dialogue and the representation of Polish interests within it.