Given the mounting challenges the EU is facing, neither Germany nor East-Central Europe (ECE) can risk putting their traditionally close partnership in jeopardy at a time when cooperation is most needed. To what extent the ECE region can be brought back into the EU's core will depend as much on the actions of their governments as on Germany's and France's willingness to offer a more inclusive policy agenda given the conditions of an impending Brexit. The success or failure of bringing the ECEs back into the heart of Europe will ultimately not just determine the future of the ECE but also the EU.


The potential for an ideological clash is significant in the Central and Eastern European (CEE) space. This clash is an integral dimension of the struggle the EU faces to identify a 21st century narrative that captures the imagination of citizens across the continent. This is especially true of those in the younger generations without the experience or recollection of the post-World War II era. (...) Global leadership, in this context, is an ethical imperative, which calls for the articulation of interests anchored in a vision of the future as much as an understanding of human needs. The imperative is a return to the "good society" realism of Brzezinski and Kennan.


Simply put, if no effective armed drone use regime is put in place, the scenarios related to armed drone use can become ever more dramatic. (...) Both the US and the EU stand to benefit from recognizing this dangerous trend and promoting the need to build consensus over the need to develop a comprehensive international armed drone use regime. (...) The efforts to control drone usage could be challenging in the face of China's relative promiscuity when it comes to selling drones. Therefore, (...) the US and possibly the EU, in the near term may be best suited to include Chinese leaders in determining such policy.


Warsaw on the Way to Kerneuropa? Germany as Poland’s Bridge to the EU’s Center

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of shifting geopolitical and geostrategic considerations shaping the increasingly multi-speed European Union (EU), this paper examines the prospect of possible future closer cooperation between Poland and Germany. It is argued that a deeper German-Polish alliance in the EU could hinder the process of Warsaw being pushed to the political periphery of the Union. By focusing on Berlin, Poland could use it as a bridge to Kerneuropa, or the core of the EU. An alternative this article considers is the prospect of Poland enhancing its ties in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), and especially with the Visegrad Group (V4) of countries. In this scenario, the V4 might want to counterbalance German dominance in Europe.

Keywords: German-Polish relations, Germany, Poland, European Union, core-periphery cleavages

Introduction
Europe is in persistent crisis mode. It seems there is still a long way to go to effective reforms to keep the European project viable. After the 2016 referendum, the United Kingdom (UK) is on its way out of the EU (Brexit). In France, the pro-European candidate Emmanuel Macron won, but Front National leader Marine Le Pen showed that the extreme right-wing could gather large parts of the French nation behind her. In Ukraine, all attempts to stop the war in the eastern part of the country have failed.¹ The refugee crisis seems calm for the mo-

ment, but still, the fundamental problems that led to the pictures we saw in the summer of 2015 have not been solved. On the other side of the Atlantic, the new United States (US) administration under President Donald Trump is still an uncertain political factor that makes US foreign policy anything but predictable.2

The EU member states must react to these complex circumstances and try to find common answers. Even though some of them seem to contemplate national solutions, it is appropriate to say that for most of the challenges the EU is facing today, only joint action by the member states can create permanent solutions. One can assume that those answers will mostly be found by the big member states, above all Germany.

Against the background of Germany’s leading position within the EU, the relationship between Berlin and smaller member states is interesting. This paper focuses on the relationship between Germany and Poland. While Germany’s leadership position seems unquestioned,3 it is interesting how Poland will position itself towards its biggest neighbor. Presumably, this case highlights the emerging cleavage between the EU’s core states and its eastern periphery. Concerning this cleavage, the paper presents an analysis of the possibilities Polish foreign policy has and what its effects could be. The argument is structured in three parts. First, the theoretical framework that sets the frame of the analysis presented in this paper is the center-periphery divide within the EU.4 After a brief description of the divide, the text analyses the present German-Polish relationship by focusing on the latest events. After defining the status quo, it will further consider two geopolitical options for Warsaw and describe their practicality—closer cooperation with CEE states or rapprochement with Germany.

Overall, it is argued that while Poland is not part of Europe’s center, Germany could be its bridge to its core. This could strengthen Poland’s position in Europe and avoid further isolation. The key question therefore is what Poland will decide to do.

1. Core and Periphery

Historically, Europe never has been a homogeneous continent. Therefore, it is no surprise that the EU also has no uniform construction. It is divided on various levels. One of them is the so-called center-periphery divide. It describes Europe’s separation into a central core and a periphery. According to this division, the core is where we can find Europe’s rule-makers, net payers and Eurozone creditors. On the periphery, we find the rule-takers, net receivers and debtors within the Eurozone. The core are the member states with the highest integration levels within the various structures of the EU. This is the basis for the ongoing discussion of a “multi-speed” Europe. But actually, the description of this issue is not new. In 1994, Wolfgang Schäuble (together with Karl Lamers) wrote in a paper that a Kerneuropa (core Europe) would be inevitable.

At first, Kerneuropa, together with related terms like “multi-speed” or “two-speed” Europe, described different opinions of how fast the integration of an ever-closer Union should look like. Nowadays, this approach is increasingly questioned and alternatives are given – as recently presented by the Commission.

6 Karl Lamers (*1935), 1980-2002 Member of the German Bundestag, foreign policy spokesman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag.
seek a different integration speed or even a contrasting direction of the Union, it seems obvious that a multi-speed Europe has already become the present political fundament of the EU.

Schweiger and Magone describe an emerging center-periphery cleavage in the EU that could be seen in the “2008-09 global financial crisis and the subsequent sovereign debt crisis.” But of course, this divide should not be limited to financial and fiscal issues, for it is also seen in political fields. When it comes to furthering the integration process, we might see more cooperation on political fields like, for example, Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP).

The question is not whether a multi-speed Europe is an alternative for the EU because it is an obvious fact that it is already taking place today. One question that could be asked is, how non-core states will react to those settings in the future.

While Germany (together with France) is counted as one of the most important core members, Poland is either seen at the periphery or within a third group with other CEE states. That means that Poland is not among the big “decision-makers”. The Polish government does not seem to be satisfied with this position. Very often this is connected to the polemics of a Polish state that believes it is losing its sovereignty to a German-controlled Europe. But it was already the goal of the previous Polish government to increase its influence within the EU.

More influence would mean to try to be part of Kerneuropa. To become part of the decision-making center, or at least to gain more influence on the EU’s core, would probably mean an improvement of

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relations with Germany. The alternative to that could only mean to try to form a bloc within the Union that could be competitive vis-à-vis Germany. To analyze which of these two options is being pursued by the current Polish government, a closer look at the relations between Berlin and Warsaw is necessary.

2. The State of Polish-German affairs

When Jaroslaw Kaczyński’s Law and Justice party (PiS) took over the office of president in May 2015, and five months later gained an overwhelming majority in the parliamentary elections, observers of German-Polish relations went on alert and expected damage to diplomatic contacts between the neighbors. Their worries centered on the memories of the tense relationship of 2005 to 2007 when PiS ruled Poland for the first time. As soon as it had won the election, PiS emphasized Poland would not be subordinate to Berlin. It is the party’s narrative that the preceding government had become a “junior” partner of Germany, incapable of its own sovereign foreign policy. Under the new government, Poland’s foreign policy started off remaining friendly towards Germany, but unlike under the Donald Tusk and Ewa Kopacz governments, Warsaw focused more on its partners in the V4 as well as on the UK.

In the summer of 2016, there were the first signs of change. Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski praised the ties between Berlin and Warsaw as very good. The statement must be put into the right political context. It was said only a short while after British voters

called for Brexit. In the past, London had been an important partner for Warsaw. It was obvious in this situation that Poland would need another strong ally within the EU. The same context must include the secret and unofficial meeting between German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Kaczyński in Meseberg near Berlin in July 2016.\(^\text{19}\) In a “harmonic and nice atmosphere”, the German head of government and the PiS party leader probably tried to find common positions to Europe’s latest challenges and maybe also discussed the question of Tusk as president of the European Commission. The Polish side under the unquestioned guidance of the PiS party leader, who had not been seen as a huge Germanophile in the past, tried to find a pragmatic approach in this situation. Most likely, both partners agreed to continue to meet in the future. This was maybe the foundation for a later meeting that took place in Warsaw.

Observers could recognize other changes in the Polish stance towards Berlin. For example, when Berlin’s coordinator for German-Polish relations and Prime Minister of Brandenburg Dietmar Woidke strongly criticized the stationing of US soldiers on Polish soil in January 2017, the Polish side did not criticize Berlin.\(^\text{20}\) It was a surprise because in the past, the PiS government had always strongly reacted especially to criticism from Germany.\(^\text{21}\)

In February 2017, Merkel visited Warsaw. Beside meetings with the leaders of Civic Platform (PO) and the Polish People’s Party (PSL) and representatives of the German minority, Merkel also met with President Andrzej Duda and Merkel’s counterpart Prime Minister Beata Szydło. The most important meeting, though, was the one between

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Kaczynski and Merkel. The tenor of the whole visit was that on specific issues both sides had differences of opinion, but generally, there had been a fundamental rapprochement that could lead to the normalization of relations between Merkel’s and Kaczynski’s governments, which would also have a positive influence on Europe. Political journalists felt that it was more than a courtesy visit, rather an attempt to escape from threatening isolation in Europe. Both partners’ views do not always coincide, but many observers thought they were witnessing a pragmatic approach of the two sides. The very reason for that could be that both may consider the other necessary to solve at least some of the problems of the Union mentioned above.

Even though it seemed Warsaw and Berlin came closer together, no agreement was reached on the question of the presidency of the European Council. While Merkel had been a strong supporter of a second term for Tusk, the Polish government was strictly against it. The question had not been such a great controversy between Poland and Germany but more like a discrepancy between Poland and the rest of the EU. However, after Szydlo attempted to block Tusk’s appointment, she was celebrated by her own party as a sort of resistance fighter against Brussels. The result was the isolation of Poland on the EU stage—at least on that question.

Since then, German-Polish relations have not really improved. The Polish ambassador to Germany, Andrzej Przylebski calls them nowadays even bad, which is indeed a very undiplomatic step. He also names Germany as the one at fault.

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3. **Cooperation vs. Confrontation**

It seems the current diplomatic problems between Germany and Poland could probably all be solved by cooperation and compromise. They are not arguing about borders or money (even if reparations has become an issue, especially in right-wing media).\(^{25}\) This gives rise to the question whether the reason for the misunderstanding is maybe more complex. Generally speaking, the political relations are not catastrophic but have plenty of room for expansion: Polish government sources say Warsaw has a better relationship in private with its neighbor and biggest trading partner than it appears in public. Meseberg was a perfect example of that. Close ties to Germany can be very dangerous in Polish domestic politics. Sometimes, PiS keeps the friendship quiet to avoid angering its own right-wing voters.

Nevertheless, Poland needs strong allies as protection. The reason lies in its geopolitical position. Since the UK decided to leave the EU, Warsaw has tried to build stronger ties with Washington. It was the strong wish of the Polish government to get President Trump to visit Poland as soon as possible, and saw it come to fruition in July 2017. His stop in Warsaw was meant to signal that Poland may have its critics in the EU but a strong ally on the other side of the Atlantic. So far, Trump has not yet actually carried through with any PiS government initiative. During his presidential campaign, Trump promised to support Poland, for example, to get the Smolensk airplane wreck returned to the country. But nothing has happened. Warsaw cannot align its politics on such an uncertain factor as Trump. In addition, other important EU member states have slightly distanced themselves from Washington. Above all, Merkel must be mentioned here. She has always been transatlantic, but seems rather disappointed by the Trump administration. During a campaign appearance in Bavaria, the Chancellor said Europe could no longer rely on the US. As President Trump continues its present course, stronger ties between Washington and

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Warsaw would probably deepen Poland’s isolation in Europe. Other partners will not support that course. But even if Trump’s policy is totally disregarded, it would still be a matter of fact that Washington is a rather exotic partner for Poland, given its distance.

Polish history has shown that Poland’s geopolitical agenda has and always will be connected to Germany and Russia. The reason plain and simple lays in its very geographic location. That can only be changed if either Germany or Russia lose a lot of their hard power. From the outset, cooperation between Poland and Russia can be ruled out for sure. The reasons are mostly historical: the PRL was a quasi-Soviet occupation, Katyn, Smolensk, Russian threats to Eastern Europe, etc.

As mentioned earlier, Poland may have two foreign policy options for its orientation toward the Core-Periphery Divide within the EU.

4. Closer Ties within the V4

The first option would be to increase Poland’s political distance to the West and try to form an opposition to the core. That would mean a focus on closer ties to Budapest and other CEE partners. From the early 1990s, Polish foreign policy has been oriented towards its neighbors in the region.

But could the V4 group be the fundament of a counterpart to Europe’s center? No. For one thing, the Visegrad states would be too weak to form a real counterpart. Even in cooperation with other CEE member states, its political influence would be too small. For another thing, on certain and very important issues, the Visegrad states have diametrically opposite positions. Poland for at least 100 years has seen its geopolitical challenge in its geographical position between Germany and Russia. However, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are more oriented towards Germany and the Danube area, the heritage of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Hungary, protected by the Carpathians, sees no threat from Russia and is more focused on the Danube area.

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26 The collapse of Russia and the weakening of German power in Europe is actually one of the initial theses of G. Friedman, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*, New York: Doubleday, 2009.

Warsaw, on the one hand, is afraid of Russian revisionism and concerned about Germany’s growing hegemony in Europe (the return of the German question), and, on the other hand, Budapest wants to be a strategic partner for both Moscow and Berlin to strengthen its own role in Central Europe.

It cannot be in Poland’s interest to see closer ties between its Visegrad partners and Russia. Nonetheless, it is Budapest especially that wants to normalize connections with Moscow. Prague and Bratislava have no interest whatsoever in trying to politically counterbalance Germany in the EU.²⁸

Bearing that in mind, one could ask the question where would be the geopolitical basement for the V₄. Is there perhaps a cultural–ideological gap between core Europe and the Visegrad states that could unite the V₄? When Prime Minister Szydło took part in an international conference in Przemyśl in southeast Poland concerning cooperation in the Carpathian area, in her opening speech she called for stronger collaboration in the region. She added that the CEE is going to set the tone in the debate about the EU’s future by their common values, principles and their culture.²⁹ One could raise the question what those common values, principles and culture are and how they differ from those in the “West”. Primarily, it could be a different understanding of how a democratic state should function. When, for example, parts of the political right in Poland say that the will of the nation always stands above the law, it is questionable whether this concept is compatible with the model of western democracies. In Hungary, Viktor Orban expresses this difference between the West and his own country by calling Hungary an “illiberal democracy.”³⁰ We should ask the question whether parts of the CEE, by making one step away from

liberalism, are on their way to authoritarianism. Maybe this could be an element to unite this way of Europe against the West.

Poland is—just like Hungary—no authoritarian state. This polemical claim is often heard from liberal circles near the Vistula but also from Western Europe (especially in media). But still, Poland is far away from historical and present examples of authoritarian regimes. It is no Sanation Poland of the interwar time, it is—even if sometimes polemically compared—no PRL 2.0. It is for sure no pseudo-democratic state like Russia or Turkey.

The reason that Poland is compared to those regimes, even by high-ranked politicians, can be seen in the fact that the main political decisions are not inevitably made by the president or the prime minister, but by a simple member of the Polish parliament. Of course, that simple member happens to be the leader of the governing party. For many Poles and many foreign observers, this form of governing the state from the background creates the impression Poland could be ruled by a form of government that somehow tends to authoritarianism.

The Polish opposition for some time has accused the PiS government of planning a “Polexit”. But there is no real evidence for that. Szydło recently said that everything must be done to avoid any more withdrawals from the EU.

T. Piątek, ‘Mamy autorytarny reżim. Trzeba odejść od komputera i wyjść na ulicę’ [We have an authoritarian regime. We have to leave the computer and go out onto the street], Gazeta Wyborcza, 14 April 2016, http://wyborcza.pl/1,75968,19920486,mamy-autorytarny-rezim-trzeba-odejsc-od-komputera-i-wyjsc-na.html [2017-04-28].

There could be a lot of examples of that. For instance, the German newspaper Die Zeit recently called Poland and Hungary “authoritarian” in an interview with Vice-President of the European Commission Frans Timmermanns (M. Krupa, H. Wefing, U. Ladurner, ‘Wie gefährlich sind diese Männer für Europa, Herr Timmermans? (Interview mit Frans Timmermanns)’ [How dangerous are those men for Europe, Mr. Timmermans? (Interview with Frans Timmermanns)], Die Zeit, 3 May 2017, http://www.zeit.de/2017/19/polen-ungarn-eu-kommission-frans-timmermans-viktor-orban-jaroslaw-kaczynski [2017-05-03]). Another example from the cultural sector would be the very famous German crime series Tatort [Crime scene], which claimed the Polish opposition would only be able to communicate with each other via the TOR network, like in Turkey, China or Russia. D. Wnendt, ‘Borowski und das dunkle Netz’ [Borowski and the Darknet], Tatort, ARD, Germany 2017.

rejected speculation he would try to initiate a Polexit and cooperate with political forces trying to destroy the EU.\textsuperscript{34}

However, we can imagine a scenario in which it would be possible to see Poland leave the EU, specifically over the migration question. If the EU puts more pressure on Poland to force it to accept large numbers of refugees, we could see Polish society rejecting that pressure and a rise of Euroscepticism in Poland. This is the only scenario now. It seems to be highly speculative and unlikely to happen in the next few years. Poles still are one of the most pro-European nations in Europe. About 70–80\% of Polish society supports their country’s membership in the EU.\textsuperscript{35} But as opinion polls also show us, more than two-thirds of Poles would not accept Muslim immigration through the quotas’ system into their country.\textsuperscript{36}

Returning to the question whether Poland’s CEE neighbors—above all the V4 states—could be an alternative for Warsaw, we can conclude that, on one hand, there still is no geopolitical foundation for that. But on the other hand, we can observe an ideological proximity to those countries. It seems like that could lead to greater division between core Europe and its Eastern periphery on an ideological basis.

5. **A Pragmatic Approach between Germany and Poland**

As mentioned, at least by the Polish government, closer cooperation within the V4 is also understood as creating a counterpart to alleged German hegemony in the EU.\textsuperscript{37} Its aim is to decrease the po-

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\textsuperscript{37} Concerning an alleged hegemony of Europe. See also: L. Mausbach, ‘German Priorities are now to Hedge the Damage of Brexit and to keep the EU together’, \textit{Visegrad Insight}, 6 April 2017, http://
political influence of core Europe, especially of Germany, and to form a counter-core. But would it not be a much better strategic step to seek rapprochement between Berlin and Warsaw in terms of pragmatic change—especially in the foreign policy of Poland?

To gain influence within the EU, Poland is reliant on diplomatic partners. Warsaw’s greatest fear should be to place itself in political isolation because that would mean a loss of political influence. To protect itself from marginalization, it might be a good solution to try to return to pragmatism. Pragmatism used here is meant the acceptance of Germany’s role in Europe and its ruling position within core Europe. It is also meant the acceptance of one’s own political possibilities. That would mean in turn distancing itself from idealistic ideas like Intermarium (Miedzymorze) or the Three Seas Initiative (Trojmorze), which most likely are not achievable at all.

A great influence here is the result of the French presidential election in May 2017. Macron’s victory probably will lead to closer connections between Germany and France. If these would mean a renaissance of the German-French tandem, Poland must decide, if it wants to take part in this process. If yes, we might see a revival of the Weimar Triangle. If not, it could lead to the further isolation of Poland. It might be reasonable that the latest German-Polish rapprochement must be seen against the background of Berlin’s wish to find a reliable partner in Europe. Given that partner could be the French Republic under the lead of President Macron, Poland must be very careful not to be abandoned or put into—at least—the second row. It will be very interesting how Poland will react to the changes on the EU level proposed by France. There is thus a strong suspicion Poland will not succeed in tying itself closer to the German-French tandem. Macron has on various occasions been and still is, highly critical of the politics of the current Polish government.

visegradinsight.eu/german-helplessness/ [2017-04-28].
Germany remains in its leadership position. As former Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski once mentioned, Germany is an essential member of the EU. Nothing can be done to it, but on the other hand, Germany is too small to dominate alone. Even the PiS leader agrees with his former fellow party member Sikorski. According to Kaczynski, Berlin is not able to have “soft dominance” of Europe. It is too weak to dominate it like the US did in the past. It is right to say that Germany is not ready to be Europe’s hegemon in a manner that would actually be a solution for the other members of the EU. Probably, Germany is even unwilling to fulfil that role, but at the same time pushed into it. Parts of the Polish right might add at this point that Germany is very willing to fulfil the role of Europe’s leader. However, there is no visible agenda in Berlin to lead.

With Germany’s position in Europe now on the rise, the question whether the Polish raison d’État really is to form an opposite pole to Germany must be answered by Warsaw. The answer could be that the EU needs no Polish antithesis to Germany, but the start of a German-Polish engine.

This German-Polish engine doesn’t have to run by great sympathy or even love for each other. Both partners should be led by common interest and pure realpolitik. That would mean fewer soapbox speeches about “barefoot meetings” and more cooperation in trying to find compromises on certain issues.

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42 An expression frequently used by the German President Steinmeier to describe the beginning of German-Polish relations at the Congress of Gniezno in the year 1000.
Conclusion

Poland’s governing party leader Kaczynski has on numerous occasions criticized the concept of a multi-speed Europe. As mentioned earlier, the core concept in today’s Europe has already become a reality and inevitable. Therefore, Poland must react to this situation. Here, Germany will be a key orientation for Poland.

Warsaw could be in opposition to Berlin, but given the fact that Germany will be Europe’s primus inter pares for the next decade it would also mean Poland would be in opposition to Europe’s decision-making core. Poland cannot relinquish working together with partners in Europe. The result would be political isolation. The V4 seem to have neither the political influence nor the sense of togetherness needed to form a real counterpart to Germany and the rest of Europe’s center. Overseas partners like the US are also no real alternative for Warsaw due not only to its distance but also the current US foreign policy under President Trump. On the banks of the Potomac, there is no political will to support a counterpart to what former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld once called “new Europe” to an “old” Europe led by Germany.

The question of how Poland orients itself towards the Kerneuropa—by opposition or rapprochement—highly corresponds to Poland’s geopolitical focus. Warsaw could take advantage of good German-Polish relations to avoid isolation within the EU. It could use Germany as a bridge to core Europe because it will be much easier to provide Polish input to the debate on the future of the EU if Warsaw is not standing on its own or depending on partners also mostly seen as outsiders. The present course of the Polish government is the biggest obstacle to be eminent in the EU. This question strongly influences Poland’s position as a policy-maker or just a policy-taker.

Rapprochement with Germany could also result in a revival of the Weimar Triangle. By a revitalization of the grouping of Poland, Germany and France, Warsaw could even become a part of Europe’s core and gain influence within the European project.

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