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In search of a common spirit: the countries of the Weimar Triangle in the Covid-19 crisis

The coronavirus crisis has affected the countries of the Weimar Triangle to varying degrees. Bilateral relations between Germany and Poland as well as Germany and France have been strongly influenced by border closures, which have led to tensions between the countries. Although Franco-German relations seem to be gaining momentum after years of relative gridlock, the lack of Franco-Polish cooperation as well as common initiatives led to the complete invisibility of the Weimar Triangle. At this point, new ways of thinking are urgently needed if the Triangle is to fulfil its raison d'être.

One month before the crisis broke out in Europe, French President Emmanuel Macron announced a restart of the Weimar Triangle during his visit to Poland in early February 2020, stating that Brexit required a new dynamic among the remaining EU members. Two months later, it can be stated that the Weimar Triangle did not pass this stress test.

In this paper, we intend to examine whether there have already been any bilateral initiatives to mitigate the effects of the current crisis and how, in particular, cross-border cooperation has worked.

Germany and France: never so close and yet so far away?

One of the areas affected most by Covid-19 was European trans-border cooperation. As far as Franco-German relations are concerned, a very mixed picture emerges, marked by the admission of French patients to German hospitals on the one hand and the closure of

borders on the other. The latter currently weighs heavily on Franco-German relations as the border regions are the pivot and focal point of Franco-German cooperation.

It is bad news that, in view of unilateral decisions, Franco-German cooperation mechanisms such as the recently established Committee on Cross-Border Cooperation were ignored or used only very late in the game. However, it is important not to lose sight of the close network of personal contacts between actors and decision-makers, which were quickly mobilised even in times of the coronavirus crisis. This includes the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly, a relatively young actor on the Franco-German stage, which might serve as a guardian of Franco-German relations. Its joint position paper “Together against the coronavirus” shows this potential.

On a bilateral level, the Franco-German dispute over how European solidarity should be defined and spelled out in financial instruments also came to the fore again, and there has been much talk of a failure of the Franco-German engine in the coronavirus crisis. It must be stressed, however, that both countries have moved towards one another in recent years, with Germany incrementally changing its position on other Member States' public debts and France at least making a credible effort to reduce its own public deficit. The Franco-German initiative for a European recovery fund can be seen as the preliminary climax of this development and a genuine opportunity for Europe after the crisis. In this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic might strengthen the functioning of the Franco-German tandem again after years of relative standstill.

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Germany and Poland: intensive socio-economic cooperation deserves better crisis coordination

The stress test in terms of cross-border cooperation was not passed satisfactorily in the case of the German-Polish frontier. Germany remains Poland's main trading partner while the roughly 125,000 Polish citizens commuting to Germany every day make up the largest group of cross-border workers in the EU. Many of them work in healthcare, with hundreds of hospitals, nursing homes and factories in eastern Germany relying on the Polish labour force.

However, the lack of preparation and coordination in managing the crisis at this very specific border is striking. First, both Poland and Germany closed their frontiers at a relatively early stage of the pandemic. Second, the Polish government passed a law according to which all Polish citizens abroad could return to Poland but were subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine. This decision jeopardised both the professional and the private lives of this massive cross-border working force. Thousands of them had to make the tough decision to either stay on the Polish side of the border with their families during lockdown or find a new temporary home on the German side where they were employed. This situation gave rise to huge social unrest, which finally prompted some residents to organise protests against the quarantine rules. It took almost two months before workers were able to cross the border freely again.

Unfortunately, such cross-border turbulence has dominated the general image of Polish-German cooperation. Nevertheless, we have also seen positive examples in the area of medical aid. The City of Wrocław arranged support from a Dresden laboratory that took on 200 tests per day of patients from Lower Silesia, relieving Wrocław's own testing system.

Without any doubt, Polish-German crisis management has been insufficient so far against the backdrop of tight socio-economic links. Surprisingly, no bilateral consultations regarding economic and financial aspects have taken place, despite the fact that Germany's decision to launch its "shield" was most important for Poland. The Macron-Merkel initiative with respect to a recovery fund is important for Poland as well. Its advantage from Poland's point of view is the equal treatment of Member States both inside and outside the euro area.

Lack of a Franco-Polish dimension to the Weimar Triangle

Since France and Poland do not share borders, cooperation was not a given during the Covid-19 crisis. Moreover, Poland has not positioned itself as the leader of a particular European path during the crisis and has been virtually absent from constructive European debates. Bilateral relations between France and Poland have deteriorated significantly since the national-conservative Law and Justice Party (PiS) took power. In November 2016, the Polish government abruptly terminated a three billion euro contract with Airbus and purchased American helicopters instead, creating a real diplomatic earthquake and a lasting crisis of confidence. Even though President Emmanuel Macron focused on a resumption of bilateral relations at the beginning of this year, the coronavirus crisis could not hide the fact that there is currently no Franco-Polish dimension to the Weimar Triangle, thus affecting the Triangle's capacity to act as a whole.

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Consequences for bi- and trilateral cooperation

The three Weimar Triangle countries have so far missed the opportunity to act in concert in the Covid-19 crisis.

The Franco-German initiative for a European recovery fund shows nevertheless that there is fresh momentum that should be seized. Moreover, on 1 July 2020 Germany will take over the presidency – which some are already calling the “corona presidency” – of the EU Council. Although it has not yet presented the final plan for its presidency, statements by Chancellor Angela Merkel and Foreign Minister Heiko Maas indicate that Germany will focus on the reconstruction of the EU economy and anti-crisis measures. With a view to the Weimar Triangle, three levels of cooperation should be addressed:

1. Cross-border issues: insufficient cross-border coordination, in particular in the healthcare sector, and the working conditions of commuters need to be improved in future crises. Such issues as the exchange of doctors, storage of medical equipment and testing systems should be the subject of more serious cooperation between the three countries. Existing experiences of bilateral cooperation, for example in the field of Franco-German cancer research, can serve as a point of departure for this. Coordinators for regional cooperation between the three countries should hold a special meeting in order to establish a faster and more efficient exchange of information as well as “special transit zones” for commuters in the event of future health crises.

2. Bilateral dimensions: the Franco-German initiative for a recovery fund is another initiative of the “tandem” for overcoming the current impasse within the EU. However, spending rules and burden-sharing remain open for negotiation. The shape that they ultimately take may depend on support from Central European

countries, including Poland. Although Germany and France are slowly getting on the right common track again, the Triangle as a whole is weak. Hence, German-Polish bilateral cooperation urgently needs a boost as well as greater ambitions.

3. Trilateral initiatives: the current pandemic made it clear that crisis management still mainly falls within the competence of the Member States. This reality gives rise to difficulties from the point of view of the European Commission, in particular regarding unilateral decisions of Member States to introduce border controls and embargos on the export of medical products, which have undermined the principle of European solidarity. As a result, the Commission should have an interest in receiving common suggestions from these three important countries on how to overcome complications with respect to both communication and coordination that arose especially in the first few weeks of the pandemic. Another key trilateral initiative could focus on the future of European industry, namely efforts to shorten its supply chains and the anticipated necessities of re-industrialisation and re-localisation (mostly from China). Poland – with its important manufacturing facilities – could play a more significant role in the restoration of German and French Europe-based industrial investments. Best practice initiatives such as the Franco-German factory for battery cells for electric vehicles – a project that Poland is looking to become involved in – must be seen as a benchmark for jointly regaining European sovereignty.

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The series »Acting European? The European Union and the Weimar Triangle in the Coronavirus Crisis« sheds light on current responses and new policy approaches in tackling the long-term consequences of the pandemic both within the countries of the Weimar Triangle and at the EU level. The first part of the series looks at the national policies pursued by France, Poland and Germany, cooperation among them, and their visions of what a European response to the crisis should look like. The second part focuses on the EU level and examines how the present crisis is likely to impact key dimensions of cooperation within the Union and beyond its borders.

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