

Martin Koopmann

Europe needs Weimar:
Perspectives on the Weimar
Triangle in times of crisis

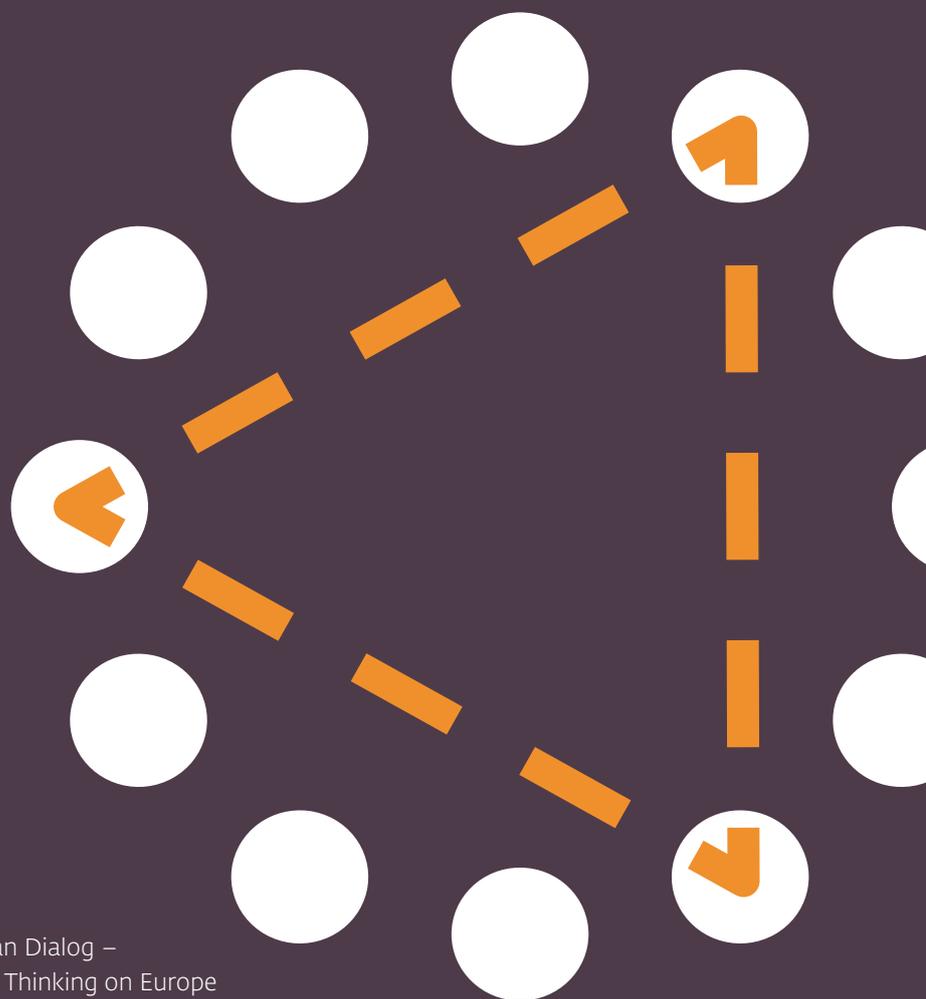


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Executive summary

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The Weimar Triangle is a complex and at times contradictory construct. Established in 1991 as a result of a political initiative, it has given rise to a diverse network of social initiatives, but does not have any institutions at state level. Its central objective to lead Poland to the European Community has long since been achieved. However, this trilateral cooperation has neither been declared to be obsolete, nor have new objectives been defined since the eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU). Since then, the Triangle has kept an extremely low profile in the political public sphere. A quarter of a century after its foundation, it is, at best, associated with gesture politics.

At the same time, its environment has undergone radical change since 1991. The EU is locked in crisis mode and having to contend with fundamental problems that are hamstringing its ability to act. Following successive waves of enlargement, the Union has become more difficult to govern and is facing processes of globalisation and international conflicts for which it is not sufficiently prepared. In the face of these challenges, many citizens have little trust in the European institutions and the political establishment in general. European policy is largely dominated by crisis and conflict management and, at best, by efforts to shape specific policy areas. There is a wholesale lack of long-term and inspirational community projects. The UK's decision to leave the EU has added a new dimension to this highly problematic situation. European policies pursued by Berlin, Paris and Warsaw are characterised by a common and increasing tendency to formulate policy with national interests in mind, all the while losing sight of the principle of consensus. The new dawn of the early 1990s has entirely dissipated today.

An important factor behind the Weimar Triangle's ineffectiveness in the area of European policy is the three countries' different perceptions of Franco-German relations. Until 2015, Warsaw sought to be involved in the bilateralism between Berlin and Paris on an equal

footing. France, for its part, put the brakes on this and viewed any relativisation of its own influence with concern. Meanwhile, Germany took its traditional seat on the fence. While it is too early to make any reliable predictions as to the impact of the change in government in Poland, the signs point to isolationism rather than to rapprochement.

The analysis of the situation is therefore sobering. The point of departure for reforming the Triangle is more difficult than ever. And yet these manifold crises and problems, and especially the UK's future exit from the Union, lead us to just one conclusion, namely that Europe needs Weimar. Tasks and objectives must be formulated that do not overstretch the Triangle in the short term and which, at least in the long term, live up to the fundamental challenges that the EU is facing. Three points should be considered in this regard.

First, the Weimar Triangle must, in the short term, be used as a platform for building trust. In a community of states that is so closely linked as the EU, Member States must, through dialogue with one another, constantly explain and justify their national governments' political motivations, objectives and priorities. The relevant formats for this should not be under any pressure to inject specific political impetus into discussions or elaborate proposals. Such institutions should bring together political and administrative decision-makers, as well as representatives from think tanks and research institutes.

Second, the Triangle should, in the medium term, declare security and defence policy to be a priority of its collective action, and supplement this with general foreign policy issues as the case arises. Against the backdrop of a track record of cooperation, a permanent security policy dialogue should be established to draft strategic objectives, pursue permanent crisis monitoring in order to coordinate rapid responses to crises, and to develop tangible civilian and military cooperative

projects. Moreover, the Triangle should become institutionalised with the establishment of a Weimar security and defence policy council.

Third, Germany, France and Poland should aim, at least in the long term, to assume strategic planning and coordination tasks in important future fields of European integration. This will need to comprise efforts to shape a coherent and effective enlargement and neighbourhood policy, as well as the development of converging objectives in the energy policy field.

In general, and irrespective of the current political situation, the Weimar Triangle must be able to make an important contribution to mediating and resolving fundamental political conflicts within the EU on the other Member States' behalf. And it must be able to inject impetus into the EU with the objective of positively influencing the Union's long-term development for the benefit of all. This can only be achieved as a supplement to good Franco-German relations and not as a substitute for them.



Europe needs Weimar: Perspectives on the Weimar Triangle in times of crisis¹

Dr Martin Koopmann²

The Weimar Triangle is, in many ways, a complex and at times contradictory construct. Established with a declaration by the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France and Poland³ adopted in Weimar in 1991, it is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Its anniversaries are marked at regular intervals and are occasions for trilateral civil society and cultural initiatives as well as joint political declarations by the three governments. At the same time, there has hardly been any other alliance of states whose sense and purpose, indeed whose very existence – both within and outside of this group – has been called into question as often as the Weimar Triangle. On the other hand, the three countries are not bound to each other by any treaty, and no institutional structures were created as a result of the Weimar Declaration – and yet meetings of the most varied of government ministries have been held time and again in the Weimar Triangle format over the years. While the Triangle emerged as a result of a political initiative and features a diverse network of social initiatives, it has no secretary general, no national representatives and no shared office at state level. Its central objective to »lead Poland and the new democracies to the European Community« has long since been achieved. However, this trilateral cooperation has, despite occasional hiatuses, neither been declared to be obsolete, nor have new objectives been defined since the eastern enlargement of the European Union (EU).

The Weimar Triangle, a political process that, between its inception and today, has gone through both

intensive and less active phases, is marking its 25th anniversary in a Europe beset by crises. The EU – and therefore by extension the countries of the Triangle – is currently having to contend with three fundamental problems that are hamstringing its ability to act, irrespective of individual policy areas. These are not temporary phenomena, but changes that have their origins in the upheavals of 1989/90 and which are fundamental in nature. First, the Union has, despite multiple amendments to treaties, become more difficult to govern as a result of successive waves of enlargement. Since the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union, no major or substantial steps have been taken in the direction of greater integration. Rather, the conclusion of the Treaty of Lisbon helped to strengthen intergovernmental structures, even though the European Parliament was accorded greater rights. Moreover, considerable centrifugal forces have developed in the course of European integration, forces that found their most visible expression in the decision by the UK to leave the EU.⁴ And even in the areas where integration has assumed strong symbolic power since 1991, in the single currency and the Schengen Area, it is displaying unmistakable weaknesses today.

Second, the increasing inability of the EU to act in key policy areas has led to a loss of trust in European structures among the public, which is coupled with growing distrust in politics overall – also at the national level. This has paved the way for populist, sometimes right-wing extremist and generally eurosceptic political currents or parties in the EU Member States. The established middle-class parties to the right and left of the political centre, which have been the driving force behind the European integration process until now, are coming increasingly under pressure.

¹ This is the English version of a paper that was drafted as a »Note du Cerfa« for the Institut français des relations internationales.

² The author wishes to thank Dr Elsa Tulmets for her valuable advice and Francis Masson for his helpful research.

³ Joint Declaration by the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France and Poland on the Future of Europe, Weimar, 29 August 1991, http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/DE/Europa/Zusammenarbeit_Staaten/Polen/WeimarerDreieckErkl%C3%A4rung_node.html, retrieved on 28 April 2016 (original German: »Polen und die neuen Demokratien an die Europäische Gemeinschaft heranzuführen«).

⁴ 51.9% of the British population voted to leave the EU on 23 June 2016.

● Germany, France and Poland rely on a strong EU – and yet the Triangle exudes a strange sense of apathy

Third and last, the European Union is facing changes to the international order for which it was evidently not prepared. The Ukraine conflict, the war in Syria and Iraq (in the overall context of the Arab Spring), as well as the enormous refugee crisis are a reflection of profound changes to the international system that cannot be addressed by piecemeal conferences held by heads of state and government, but which require new political concepts and a new political way of thinking.

Germany, France and Poland are directly affected by these changes. All three countries are deeply embroiled in major crises and conflicts, though in Poland, the Ukraine conflict may take the highest priority; in France, the war in Syria and counterterrorism; and in Germany, the refugee crisis. Prior to the commencement of military hostilities, the Weimar Triangle, for a brief moment, even rose to prominence on the world stage as a crisis manager in the Ukraine conflict. In the years since then, there have been no convincing European policy initiatives beyond mere crisis management measures, however, and there have been no bilateral or trilateral attempts to shape European policy with long-term effects. At the same time, however, the countries of the Weimar Triangle are reliant upon a strong EU. There is no alternative for them, either politically or economically, if they intend to hold their own in a world that is dominated by strong processes of globalisation. Germany, France and Poland rely on a strong EU – and yet the Triangle exudes a strange sense of apathy. Why has the Weimar Triangle been so ineffective in the realm of European policy for so many years? Is it still even possible to compare today's Triangle with the Weimar Initiative of 1991? Which courses of action or limitations are characteristic of trilateral relations between Germany, France and Poland in light of the situation in Europe and in the three countries? Which short- and long-term goals can be formulated for the Weimar Triangle?



I.

New preconditions for trilateral cooperation: dawn of a new age in Europe

1. Changing protagonists: Germany, France and Poland

The European landscape has changed in the course of the past 25 years; indeed, it has been transformed. No level has been spared this transition, neither European integration in a communitised Europe nor the national level. It goes without saying that we must first mention Germany here, which has been refashioned politically, economically and socially thanks to reunification. The country that once derived its *raison d'être* from its integration into the European project and NATO, that is to say an alignment with the West, and which was one of the guarantees of the European integration process, has become a self-assured, albeit sometimes hesitant, central power in Europe. In the past 25 years, Germany has had to learn how to handle its newly won state sovereignty. It was not given much time to get used to this new state of affairs; the wars in Yugoslavia forced the Federal Government to abandon the basic principles of foreign and security policy of the former West German Federal Republic from as early on as the 1990s. The »linker Krieg« (which loosely translates as »left-wing war«), the first time that the Bundeswehr took part in a combat mission following a decision by the red-green Federal Government⁵, outside NATO alliance territory and without a clear basis in international law, marked a watershed in German foreign policy after 1989.⁶ In the area of European integration, whether in the context of the EU's eastern enlargement, the establishment of the Economic and Monetary Union or the management of the euro crisis, Germany adopted a more proactive policy, which, for example at the Nice Summit in 2000, resulted in sometimes intense disputes with its

partners, not least France, its long-time counterpart in the European integration process.

Neither Germany's foreign policy nor its European policy has plotted a straight course since 1991. The community-oriented, visionary Humboldt speech by Foreign Minister Fischer in 2000⁷ and Chancellor Merkel's relativising, pragmatic Bruges speech ten years later⁸ document the fact that Germany is still searching for a system of coordinates that comes close to the Western alignment in terms of coherence and stability. Germany is no longer the predictable motor of deepening integration, and its tendency to make unilateral decisions, be it in energy or refugee policy, all too often occasion resentment among its partners.⁹ In economic terms, the country has become the sole locomotive of the EU. This is, among other things, a result of the red-green government coalition's great sense of purpose, one that Berlin continues to seek for its European and foreign policy. In social terms, this EU founding member's pro-European basic consensus is coming under increasing pressure in the face of the refugee crisis. The Alternative for Germany party (Alternative für Deutschland, or AfD) that emerged in the wake of the euro crisis in Greece has now become a strong political mouthpiece for a largely eurosceptic and nationalist movement, and has seized upon the complex topic that is the refugee crisis in order to position itself against the established parties with its simplistic agenda. Election results well into the double digits at

⁷ See Joschka Fischer, *From Confederacy to Federation – Thoughts on the finality of European integration*, speech at the Humboldt University in Berlin on 12 May 2000, http://www.cvce.eu/en/obj/speech_by_joschka_fischer_on_the_ultimate_objective_of_european_integration_berlin_12_may_2000-en-4cdo2fa7-d9do-4cd2-91c9-2746a3297773.html, retrieved on 13 July 2016.

⁸ See speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the College of Europe in Bruges on 2 November 2010, <https://www.coleurope.eu/events/mrs-angela-merkel-delivered-opening-address-opening-ceremony>, retrieved on 13 July 2016.

⁹ See Barbara Lippert, »Deutsche Europapolitik zwischen Tradition und Irritation«, working paper by the Research Division EU/Europe, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, Berlin, October 2015.

⁵ A coalition between the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and Alliance '90/The Greens.

⁶ Matthias Geis, »Der linke Krieg, Kosovo, zehn Jahre danach: War es richtig, dass sich deutsche Soldaten 1999 am NATO-Kampfeinsatz beteiligten?«, in: *Die Zeit*, no. 13, 19 March 2009.

three state elections in the spring of 2016 show how successful this strategy currently is.¹⁰ It is nigh on impossible to make any accurate predictions as to the duration and long-term impact of this development at the present time. The pressure on the Federal Government is increasing, however. While Germany intends to live up to the standards expected of a leading European power, it is visibly suffering from contradictions and uncertainties.¹¹

France's European and foreign policy, on the other hand, has been characterised by considerably more stability and predictability in the past 25 years. The development of a European political project with a common foreign and security policy distinguished by critical distance from the US and an insistence upon a strong, integrated European Community domestically (especially in the single market) are the constituent elements of France's policy on Europe. Like Germany, France has helped to shape and implement each new step towards integration and each step in the direction of closer cooperation. Change has made itself felt in other areas in France. In the European context, it struggled for years with the eastward expansion of European integration (some actors continue to do so). It has – at least in political terms – long been critical of, and keen to put the brakes on, Europe's new dawn.¹² However, this is greatly outweighed today by the fact that, against the backdrop of globalisation, France delayed necessary reforms to economic and labour policy for too long. In particular, a lack of

competitiveness on the part of companies and the resulting ongoing high levels of youth employment¹³ have weakened the country on the domestic front for years and are the main reason why the right-wing extremist Front National has made such inroads into the political and social heart of the country. In France, with its opposition to structural reform, politicians have to face major social and political challenges in their efforts to implement reform agendas. The reform process initiated by the Valls government will still need a great deal of time to bring about a permanent modernisation of the country. Critics have a tough job being heard in their own country.¹⁴ And just under a year before the important presidential and parliamentary elections in 2017, there is a growing impression that the reform-oriented and pro-European forces of the left and the conservatives alike are increasingly powerless in the face of the pressure from the scaremongers and radical politicians with simple answers on the extreme right. The terrorist attacks in 2015 have also deeply shaken the country. In terms of European policy, France is now possibly weaker than it has ever been since the beginning of the European integration process.

With its accession to NATO and the European Union, Poland has undergone the most visible development of the three countries of the Weimar Triangle. These accessions reflect Poland's key political and economic priorities following the end of the Cold War. The great importance of external security in this context has always been bound up with a strong desire to be a member of the transatlantic alliance, the presence of military infrastructure on Polish territory and the USA's security guarantee that this entails. In the last 25 years, there have been both phases of particularly intensive pro-Atlantic foreign policy pursued by Warsaw

¹⁰ At the state elections held on 13 March 2016, the AfD received 15.1% of the votes cast in Baden-Württemberg, 12.6% in Rhineland-Palatinate and 24.3% in Saxony-Anhalt.

¹¹ For more on Germany's development since 1990, see Martin Koopmann and Barbara Kunz, „Deutschland 25 Jahre nach der Einheit. Partner, Führungsmacht, Modell? Perspektiven aus dem Weimarer Dreieck«, Genshagener Schriften – Europa politisch denken, Volume 3, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2016.

¹² For more on the development of France's European policy since the 1980s, see Christian Lequesne, »La France dans la nouvelle Europe. Assumer le changement d'échelle«, Paris 2008.

¹³ According to Eurostat statistics, the rate of unemployment for 15 to 24-year-olds in France was just under 25%, and therefore around 5% above the average for the EU 28.

¹⁴ See for example Nicolas Baverez, »La France qui tombe: Un constat clinique du déclin français«, Paris 2003.

- The propensity to formulate European policy according to short- and to medium-term national interests has increased significantly in Germany, France and Poland.

(culminating in Poland's involvement in the invasion of Iraq in 2003) and periods characterised by an apparent cooling of relations with the USA (especially following President Obama's refusal to build a missile defence system in Poland at the end of 2009). NATO is the most important priority for Poland's security, however. Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 has had a deep impact on Poland (and on central and eastern Europe in general) while the Ukraine conflict removed, once and for all, any possible doubts surrounding a strong transatlantic focus of Polish foreign and security policy.

Alongside accession to NATO, joining the EU represented a high degree of continuity of Polish policy and social development after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Despite some weaknesses (including unemployment rates of almost 20% in 2003¹⁵), Poland's radical transformation process in the 1990s is considered to be exemplary; this transformation has gained considerably in pace since the country's EU accession. Its economy grew by 49% between 2003 and 2014 while the average for the EU was only 11%. EU approval ratings in Polish society have been consistently high; shortly before the financial crisis, they were at 90%. Positive economic development during the debt crisis in the eurozone explains the apparent paradox that, despite strong support in society for the EU as a whole, Poland is not likely to join the eurozone in the foreseeable future. This was, of course, cemented by the electoral victory of the Law and Justice party (PiS) in 2015, which had never made a secret of its negative stance vis-à-vis the euro. For all the consistency of Poland's foreign, security and European policy over the past 25 years, the years of the first two PiS administrations between 2005 and 2007, which took the country to the brink of international isolation, stand out in particular. Today, Poland is once again facing a watershed whose full ramifications are impossible to predict.

Germany, France and Poland, which can look back on 25 years of the Weimar Triangle, have transformed since 1991. The Polish transition country and accession candidate has become a staunch member of NATO and an economically successful EU country that the PiS administration elected in 2015 aims to take down a fundamentally different path, domestically and economically, and with respect to European policy. Germany's development after the end of the Cold War has been, in economic terms, a success story (despite a number of reservations and risk factors, for instance with respect to its demographic outlook, poverty trends and investment backlogs) that the development of its foreign and European policy has been unable to keep up with. France is struggling not to fall behind economically, effectively counter the terrorist threat in the country and, at the same time, get to grips with the virulent threat posed by right-wing extremism on the domestic front. Despite the three countries' extremely different development since 1991, the policies pursued by Berlin, Paris and Warsaw share a common pattern a quarter of a century after the establishment of the Weimar Triangle. The focus of the three governments is predominantly on the domestic stage; either because they are under strong domestic political pressure (France and Germany) or because they themselves have set political priorities (Poland) that put a restructuring of the country distinct from European integration before matters of European cooperation. The propensity to formulate European policy according to short- and to medium-term national interests has increased significantly in Germany, France and Poland. With the changes that have taken place in each of the countries, their perspectives of each other have altered while the balance of their mutual relations has fundamentally changed. What is more, they are, of course, operating in a transformed European environment.

¹⁵ According to Eurostat statistics, the unemployment rate in Poland was 7.5% in 2015.

2. Transformation of the European framework

The most visible and doubtlessly significant change to the European context of national European policy was the enlargement of the European Union that took place in 2004 and 2007. Poland and nine other states in central and eastern Europe became members of the EU¹⁶, although they were yet to enjoy the same rights as the original members in certain areas (such as the free movement of workers). This transitional phase has long since been completed, however. Formally speaking, the only thing to distinguish original members from members who joined in 2004 or subsequently is the fact that some new Member States are not part of the eurozone. However, this dividing line has, with respect to Poland and also Hungary, taken on a different meaning today compared with the dividing line between EU members and accession candidates prior to 2004. Now it is Warsaw and Budapest that no longer strive to become members of the eurozone. The conditions for joining the euro are not the obstacle here, but rather the current political preferences expressed by Poland and Hungary, which are no longer compatible with the traditional objective of »ever closer union among the peoples and Member States of the European Community«.¹⁷ Moreover, the governments of these two countries have no reason to feel out on a limb. None of the major EU Member States considers integration and strengthening the Community to be the exclusive paradigms of their European policy.

An entirely new EU profile is emerging against the backdrop of globalisation in conjunction with the positive economic development of Poland that has continued up until at least 2016 and the simultaneous

economic difficulties that a number of »old« EU Member States – France, Spain, Portugal, Greece and Italy – are having to face. Perceptions of the Union as a community consisting of old (western) members and new (eastern) accession candidates or subsequent members no longer accurately reflect the complexity of the EU as a construct. Rather, particularly with regard to the economy, the EU can be divided into a north-east group geared towards free trade and liberal economic policy (including Germany) and a south-west group (including France) with a traditionally stronger focus on state control and protectionist instruments.¹⁸ It is needless to say that these groups are anything but coherent in political terms with respect to their conceptions of the future long-term direction of the European integration process. Moreover, since the failure in France and the Netherlands of major reform efforts in the mid-2000s following referendums on the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, and particularly in the face of strong eurosceptic movements in many countries, hopes that there will be a new breakthrough to make the EU, as a whole, fit for the future have all but faded. The predominant narrative of European policy is the search for solutions to crises, resolutions to conflicts and, at best, shaping specific policy areas. Despite a number of development steps, the new dawn of the early 1990s has now entirely dissipated.



¹⁶ Malta and Cyprus also joined the EU.

¹⁷ Solemn Declaration on the European Union, European Council, Stuttgart, 19 June 1983, <http://aei.pitt.edu/1788/>, retrieved on 6 July 2016.

¹⁸ See Wolf Lepenies, »Der europäische Himmelsrichtungsstreit«, in: Stiftung Genshagen (Ed.), 20 Jahre Stiftung Genshagen, Genshagen 2013, p. 26–34, http://www.stiftung-genshagen.de/fileadmin/Dateien/Publikationen/Jahresberichte/2013/SG_20-Jahre_Web.pdf, retrieved on 22 June 2016.

II. How much Weimar is left in the Triangle?

Established in 1991, the Weimar Triangle was an instrument of transition. Leading the European states of the former Eastern Bloc to the European Community was not its sole aim. The Triangle also sought, in the face of profound political upheaval in Europe and the world, to shore up its shared system of values and to develop the »new Europe« with a sense of »shared responsibility« on this basis.¹⁹ While it may be the case that the Weimar Triangle as such, i.e. efforts to coordinate policy in a trilateral framework, did not make any tangible contribution to Poland's accession to the EU (or indeed to the accession of the other eastern European states), it is impossible to overstate the symbolic value of this public commitment to shared responsibility for Europe. However, beyond this declarative level, and also beyond what has emerged in the trilateral framework at the level of culture and civil society since 1991, the accession of Poland and the other new democracies to the European Community was declared as an objective when the Weimar Triangle was established. This objective was achieved in 2004 and 2007 respectively, and the three heads of state and government enthusiastically declared their commitment to the Weimar Triangle as an »inspiring and driving force in the service of the enlarged Union« at their meeting in Wrocław.²⁰

The fact that this was confined to the level of lip service can be explained by a number of factors. Foremost among these, however, is the fundamental change that Franco-German relations, which since the time of Adenauer and Schuman had been both a motor and a stabilising element of European integration, had undergone (from as early as 1989). The equilibrium between France as the most important political and military power in western Europe and Germany as a

semi-sovereign state and economic powerhouse without any major political ambitions began to teeter soon after the fall of the Wall. The fact that Germany pushed for Slovenia and Croatia to be recognised in 1991 confirmed, from the French perspective, concerns that Berlin could be tempted to enter into new cooperative arrangements in the eastern neighbourhood as an alternative to the Franco-German partnership. The two core elements of Franco-German rapprochement – cooperation and mutual control – were called into question. This new distrust in Franco-German relations, stemming from the early 1990s, was to make itself still more keenly felt following eastern enlargement.

The different ways in which the three Weimar countries perceived this Franco-German bilateralism go a long way in explaining the Triangle's lack of effectiveness since the EU's eastern enlargement. In France, the perception of Germany as a hegemonic power in a new central Europe dominated the country's own European policy considerations. It was no coincidence that proposals for a »Franco-German union« were primarily developed in France by, among others, Foreign Minister de Villepin during the difficult work of the European Constitutional Convention immediately prior to eastern enlargement.²¹ The French tendency to respond to the reordering of Europe with ideas for strengthening Franco-German relations was diametrically opposed to the Polish objective of participation on an equal footing with the EU's long-standing bilateral leadership duo. Furthermore, the almost demanding attitude of the Polish Government of the Civic Platform (PO) with regard to a consistent opening of Franco-German bilateralism, indeed, even with

¹⁹ See the Joint Declaration on the Future of Europe by the Foreign Ministers of Germany, France and Poland, *ibid.*

²⁰ See press communiqué on future cooperation within the framework of the Weimar Triangle, meeting of the heads of state and government of France, Poland and Germany in Wrocław on 9 May 2003.

²¹ Foreign Minister Dominique de Villepin expressed such a view on 4 November 2003 in an interview with the French think tank *En temps réel*, see *Le Monde*, 13 November 2003. Pascal Lamy and Günter Verheugen had made similar proposals that same year; see their article »Plädoyer für einen deutsch-französischen Bund«, in: *Berliner Zeitung*, 21 January 2003 (French version in *Libération* from the same day).

● In 1991 the Weimar Triangle was an instrument of transition

Germany taking a constructive, leadership position on the EU, represented precisely the antithesis of French concerns over a loss of status.²²

Since the EU's eastern enlargement, Germany has taken its traditional seat on the fence. Tendencies on the part of Paris to deepen Franco-German bilateralism at least symbolically have, on the whole, met with friendly disinterest rather than constructive responses in Berlin. On the other hand, Germany was just as reluctant to share the PO administration's insistence on the consistent involvement of Warsaw in Franco-German coordination processes. Efforts to resolve the conflict in Ukraine in the Normandy format²³ without involving Poland gave the PO administration the impression that the aim – in line with Russian interests – was to marginalise Poland in the area of crisis management. While the motives for the talks in the Normandy format are complex, the lasting impression is that the Ukraine conflict posed a direct threat to Poland and that this was and remains, from the German and French perspective, the very reason for pursuing diplomatic negotiations in the absence of Warsaw. In hindsight, the joint appearance by the Foreign Ministers of the Weimar Triangle in Kyiv in February 2014 had the appearance of being an ad-hoc event without substantial strategic thought. In terms of balancing the Triangle, the Federal Government did not manage – prior to the change of government in Warsaw in 2015, which set an entirely new course – to develop a convincing concept for maintaining the

close Franco-German cooperation while at the same time involving Poland.

In the final analysis, the attractiveness of the Weimar Triangle until the EU's eastern enlargement lay in its strong symbolic character – with the Triangle as a bridge builder helping to strengthen European values, in civil society, culturally and politically. In this phase, it benefited from the undisputed dissimilarity of its actors, with two EU and NATO members on the one hand and an aspiring accession country, whose economy had been weakened by decades of socialist planning, on the other. The roles were clearly defined and the question of power emerged only gradually in the Triangle, an issue that was to become a bone of contention after Poland's accession to the EU. And when the europhile and pro-German PO government was elected in 2007 while France became engulfed in ever deeper economic difficulties, the Triangle and Franco-German relations rapidly fell out of equilibrium. The commitments made in Wrocław did not result in concrete action, but rather mistrust and uncertainty. Following eastern enlargement, Berlin, Paris and Warsaw failed to define new objectives for their cooperation in the Weimar Triangle.

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²² See speech by Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski on 28 November 2011 at the German Council on Foreign Relations in Berlin, »Poland and the future of the European Union«, https://dgap.org/sites/default/files/event_downloads/radoslaw_sikorski_poland_and_the_future_of_the_eu_o.pdf, retrieved on 22 June 2016.

²³ President François Hollande, Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and the Presidents of Russia and Ukraine, Vladimir Putin and Petro Poroshenko, met on 6 November 2014 for talks on the Ukraine conflict on the fringes of a commemorative event in Normandy to mark the landing of the Allied forces at the end of the Second World War. By May 2016, the Foreign Ministers of the four countries had met on 12 occasions within the framework of the Normandy format.

III.

Point of departure in 2016: difficult starting conditions

In this anniversary year, the conceptional failures of the Triangle's actors are coupled with a political situation in Europe and the world that could scarcely be more complicated. The EU is under direct pressure to act – in the Ukraine conflict and confrontation with Russia, with regard to the conflict in Syria and Iraq and in the refugee crisis. In terms of its foreign policy, the Union is under pressure here in its relations with Turkey and its efforts to contain the flows of refugees across the Mediterranean. The mass influx of refugees has, moreover, become a highly explosive issue in its EU-internal dimension, and the Member States' already fractured sense of solidarity will be tested even further. The extent to which the EU should act as a community in its approach to refugee and asylum policy is a more controversial issue than ever. What is more, the extent to which the European Union should, in general, be organised as a community – in the sense of supranational structures and processes – has become the key focus of ubiquitous debates on the future of Europe. We must not forget that the fundamental debate on cohesion and integration in the EU got under way years ago in the context of the European debt crisis, which has also not been completely resolved to this day. The decision taken by the UK to leave the EU shows that the erosion of community thinking in the Union is a scenario that must be taken extremely seriously. This erosion has long since become a genuine threat to integration.

All of these fundamental issues require two things: first, swift and conclusive measures to limit the negative consequences for those affected and to counter the immense risk of erosion facing the European integration project. Second, long-term answers must be found to the question as to how the EU can repair fundamental design flaws in individual sectoral policies, eliminate the causes of its inability to act and thereby effectively address its citizens' general loss of trust in European structures.

Highly different answers to these fundamental questions are proffered by the Weimar Triangle countries. Concerning diplomacy with Russia in the Ukraine crisis, the positions between flexibility (France and the SPD coalition partner in the German Federal Government) and a tough stance (Poland and the CDU coalition partner in the German Federal Government) are as far apart from each other as the Union's response to the refugee crisis. Divergences are also the order of the day as far as the basic direction of European policy in the three countries is concerned, and the change of government in Warsaw in the autumn of 2015 has made these differences still more pronounced. The PiS administration has emphasised that it will not agree to a further deepening of European integration; it rejects a »supranational, federalist Europe«.²⁴

The focus of Poland's conception of Europe is on the completion of the single market, with an emphasis on strengthening the internal energy market and expanding the digital single market. Warsaw rejects further steps towards communitisation, however, including migration and asylum policy, as well as the Economic and Monetary Union. At the same time, the Polish government is of the view that the EU must not be allowed to become a two-speed union once and for all. For this reason, further political and institutional deepening of the integration process in the eurozone should, as far as Warsaw is concerned, be avoided. On the other hand, possible accession to the single currency is even less of an option for the PiS administration than it was for its predecessor, which, in light of the debt crisis, also did not consider joining the euro to be a priority. Overall, the PiS government's initial programmatic positions regarding its European policy paint of a picture of a policy

²⁴ See Witold Waszczykowski, »Wir wollen führende Rolle beim Aufbau eines stärkeren Europas«, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 23 January 2016

● Divergences are also the order of the day as far as the basic direction of European policy in the three countries.

that is clearly sceptical of integration, with an emphasis on strengthening the nation state in the EU.²⁵

In the anniversary year of 2016, there is a clear divergence of basic positions on European policy in the Weimar Triangle. The German Federal Government's emphasis in the area of refugee policy is on sharing the burden and implementing common decisions, while in the realm of financial and economic policy, it is committed to the long-term objective of further communitisation – all the while assuming that European policy will be dominated for the foreseeable future by Community and interstate principles in parallel.²⁶ This federalist, pragmatic approach is essentially shared by the French government, which is at pains to stress that the *acquis communautaire* is not up for discussion. With its long-standing emphasis on political reform of the eurozone in conjunction with tax harmonisation measures to counter tax and social dumping, Paris is committed to a differentiated integration process, i.e. a Europe of two (or more) speeds.²⁷ In all of these areas, France can now, as a rule, reckon with the support of the German Federal Government, whereas the differences it has with Warsaw are unmistakable.

The medium- and long-term ramifications of these differences for the future of the Weimar Triangle remain to be seen. For one thing, the new Polish government has only been in office for six months. Even though the political situation in and around Europe actually leaves little time for trial and error,

the new Polish government should be granted at least a one-year period of grace, as was the case for each new German Federal Chancellor and new French President in the past. Of course, the PiS government will not turn into a driver of European integration in the coming months. It remains to be seen, however, at which level cooperation on specific European policy projects may be possible. On the other hand, the elections in Germany and France scheduled for 2017 will further hamper any systematic development of trilateral cooperation. Nevertheless, it should be borne in mind that all three countries continue to express their commitment to the Weimar Triangle. Despite the fact that Poland is bent on recalibrating its relations with Germany and France, this does not signify a rejection of this format.

At the same time, Warsaw's change of tack is plain to be seen. The Weimar Triangle is no longer considered to be an instrument that Poland intends to use as a vehicle for joining an open Franco-German partnership and thereby attain equality with respect to European policy. Instead, the PiS government is placing a greater emphasis on its objective of close cooperation with the UK and the countries of the Visegrád group and Baltic Sea Region. This is an attempt to forge alternative partnerships and to strengthen Poland's own influence as a spokesman of the eastern and central European EU Member States as opposed to France and Germany. Following the UK's decision to leave the EU, it is clear, however, that, effective immediately, London can no longer be numbered among Warsaw's supporters. Even though the extent to which this strategic aim can be filled with political substance in the future is therefore completely open, Warsaw's focus will be much less on sharing in Franco-Germany leadership in the EU. It is impossible to overlook one risk in all of this, namely that the divide between the »ins« and the »outs« will not – as actually envisaged in the Treaties of Accession – be bridged, but become deeper. Reforms could be adopted in the eurozone over which Poland would have even less influence than ever before. Should the

²⁵ See, for example, the foreign policy keynote speech to the Sejm by Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski on 29 January 2016, http://www.msz.gov.pl/en/news/minister_witold_waszczykowski_on_priorities_of_polish_diplomacy?channel=www, retrieved on 16 June 2016, as well as the interview given by Waszczykowski, »Mit der Hand auf dem Herzen«, in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 April 2016.

²⁶ See Wolfgang Schäuble, »Europa zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit« in: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 25 January 2016.

²⁷ See Discours du président de la République au Parlement européen, 7 October 2015, <http://www.elysee.fr/declarations/article/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-au-parlement-europeen>, retrieved on 12 June 2016.

elections in France give rise to a reform-oriented conservative government (for instance with the pro-German Alain Juppé as President), a revitalised, more intensive Franco-German cooperative partnership could once again be within the realm of possibility. This partnership could, in turn, declare the central aim of its cooperation to be the revival of the EU based on the eurozone as the hard core of European integration.²⁸ While this is only one of several possible scenarios, there is a very real risk that a united Europe, as was the objective of the Weimar Triangle's founding fathers, could, after the successful prelude of eastern enlargement, once again become a distant prospect.



²⁸ See Alain Juppé, «Oui à une Europe debout», in: Le Monde, 8 May 2016.

IV.

The new Triangle: the case for an ambitious realism

The political framework in which the Weimar Triangle operates has undergone radical changes in past 25 years. The current European policy context is, in the face of manifold crises, less conducive to transformative European policy than ever. Poland is undergoing a phase of domestic political transformation, and Germany and France are approaching important national elections. Moreover, France is contending with a difficult economic situation at home. The three countries' perspective on the Weimar Triangle is, at the present, a sober one at best, and without any great expectations as to its immediate benefits for Europe as a whole or for European policy in Germany, France and Poland. And yet tasks and objectives can be formulated that do not overstretch the Triangle in the short term and which can, at least in the long term, live up to the fundamental challenges that the EU is facing.

The Weimar Triangle should be used as a platform for building trust. It should not be under any pressure, in this context, to elaborate specific proposals for the major challenges at hand in Europe or inject corresponding political impetus into discussions. For all of their profound strategic differences, none of the three countries claims that the European Union is not important for shaping their own future. Relations between the three countries in the past years have been – and continue to be – dominated by mutual distrust, which has increased significantly in German-Polish and also in French-Polish relations in recent times. This is also true of Franco-German relations, although their long-standing experience of cooperation in the EU softens the impact of and relativises these difficulties. Considerable efforts must nevertheless be undertaken to achieve a better understanding of the social, cultural and economic preconditions of national political strategies and fundamental decisions.

In democratic societies, explaining political motivations, objectives and priorities of national governments to the country's population is not sufficient. In a

community of states that are so closely linked as in the EU, this accountability applies just as much vis-à-vis the political decision-makers of the most important fellow Member States. Confidence-building dialogue can take place between parliamentarians, diplomats and high-ranking civil servants from a wide range of different ministries, and can be pursued behind closed doors or be supplemented by external experts from the scientific community. This dialogue should also be flanked by regular cooperation between think tanks and research institutes, which also liaise with decision-makers themselves. Such activities must not be thought of as being in competition with existing bilateral formats – above all Franco-German, but also German-Polish ones. However, the countries of the Weimar Triangle should turn their attentions to such confidence-building measures among one another most deliberately, regularly and in the long term. Appropriate formats can be established at short notice as they are not beholden to the expectations of specific initiatives or compromise solutions.

Second, the Triangle should, in the medium term, declare security and defence policy to be a priority of its collective action, and supplement this with general foreign policy issues as the case arises. It is no coincidence that the only noteworthy trilateral impetus to emerge was in the area of security and defence policy. A proposal by the foreign and defence ministers of the Weimar Triangle countries, stemming from a Polish initiative, was intended to strengthen the institutional structures of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), but yielded no tangible results, in particular owing to British resistance.²⁹ Moreover, a »Weimar

²⁹ See letter by the three foreign and defence ministers of 6 December 2010 to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in: Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense Nationale (Ed.), *Un second souffle pour l'Europe de la défense ?* January 2012, pp. 62–66, http://www.ihedn.fr/userfiles/file/debats_fond/publications/Lancaster-House_LettredeWeimar_web.pdf, retrieved on 23 June 2016; also see Claudia Major, »Ein zivil-militärisches Hauptquartier für die EU. Die Initiative des Weimarer Dreiecks belebt die laufende Debatte«, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP Aktuell 74, Berlin, October 2010.

● The Weimar Triangle should be used as a platform for building trust.

Battlegroup« was established, which was ready to be deployed in 2013. Germany, France and Poland are certainly on the same page in their analysis of the situation in important areas of foreign and security policy. In March 2015, the three foreign and defence ministers submitted joint proposals for strengthening the CFSP to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.³⁰ Even after the change of government in Poland, all three countries share the assessment that the refugee crisis can only be brought under control if the conflicts in Syria and Iraq are resolved once and for all and the situation in the Middle East and northern Africa, especially in Libya, is stabilised.

While there have certainly been considerable differences concerning the emphasis of a future EU strategy on Russia or with respect to Ukraine's EU accession prospects, the EU has managed time and again in the past two years to agree to a common approach to the conflict in Ukraine. Assessments of the relationship between the EU and NATO likewise vary between the three countries. Particularly under the new PiS government, Poland has an even stronger focus on NATO and the US security guarantee than was the case in the past, paradigms from which Germany, and, of course, especially France, have become much more independent. Despite these differences, all three countries have long been willing to engage jointly in efforts to resolve conflicts, also with troops outside the EU and outside the NATO area. The change of government in Poland has done nothing to alter this. Warsaw has pledged its continued proactive support in the efforts to combat international terrorism.³¹ And Germany is also undergoing a process, albeit a somewhat laborious one, with the aim of assuming responsibility in the future of a sort that »has not yet become routine«.³²

The Weimar Triangle should, in the face of the difficult security situation in and around Europe, but also against the backdrop of a track record of cooperation, establish an ongoing security policy dialogue. This dialogue should define objectives of cooperation at the strategic level and help to pursue permanent crisis monitoring in order to coordinate rapid joint responses to crises, as well as develop tangible civilian and military cooperative projects. In the EU context, the available instruments in this area include the CSDP's Enhanced Cooperation and Permanent Structured Cooperation. Closer cooperation between the major Member States is urgently required in order to increase the rapidity and efficiency of European action.

A Weimar security and defence policy council should be founded in order to define strategic objectives, facilitate joint crisis monitoring, coordinate crisis responses and develop cooperative projects. There is also nothing to stand in the way of the doubtlessly necessary extension of the Triangle to include the UK, as a »Weimar plus« group, as the case arises. This also applies following the UK's decision to leave the EU. The Weimar Triangle can, especially in this context, be of service in the realm of foreign, security and defence policy with regard to keeping channels of communication open in order to facilitate cooperation with London outside the CSDP framework. The council would work outside EU structures and could, as a permanent body, be set up at director-general level. With regular meetings four to six times annually, a cooperation routine would emerge on the basis of a joint work programme that would make the council independent from changes of government in individual countries.

The nascent trilateral dialogue between the Federal College for Security Studies, the Institut des Hautes

³⁰ For the letter by the three foreign and defence ministers of the Weimar Triangle of 30 March 2016, see »Weimarer Dreieck: Gemeinsamer Brief zur Weiterentwicklung der GSVP«, www.bmvg.de, retrieved on 23 June 2016.

³¹ See speech by Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs Witold Waszczykowski to the Sejm on 29 January 2016, *ibid*.

³² See speech by German Federal President Joachim Gauck at the Munich Security Conference on 31 January 2014,

- A Weimar security and defence policy council should be founded in order to define strategic objectives, facilitate joint crisis monitoring, coordinate crisis responses and develop cooperative projects.

Etudes de Défense Nationale and the Polish National Security Bureau, which should continue to be nurtured, is also worthy of mention in this context. It could support the work of the council with academic expertise and call on further institutes as the case arises. Differences of opinion within the Triangle concerning perceived threats or definitions of interest do not make these formats superfluous. On the contrary, such formats offer scope for on-going work at the interface between confidence-building and the development of specific politico-military proposals that apply to the EU and NATO in equal measure.

The establishment of institutions is no substitute for a lack of political will to address the failure to act in individual political fields. Institutions can also be counter-productive and be abused to legitimise political inaction – in such instances, they become a trap. However, the Weimar Triangle would stand to benefit from a cautious measure of institutionalisation, as long as this is not bound up with excessive expectations and, in the area of security and defence policy, occupies a field in which all three countries are convinced of the need to cooperate. If it proves to be a success, the model could potentially be applied to other fields of EU domestic policy. The precondition for this would be, at any rate, a minimum level of willingness to cooperate and political agreement regarding the objectives of such cooperation in order to avoid the pitfalls of institutionalisation.

In the long term, the Weimar Triangle must assume strategic planning tasks in key EU policy fields such as neighbourhood and energy policy.³³ This applies to two policy areas in particular in which the interests and

priorities could scarcely be more different at the present time. It will only be possible to shape a coherent and effective EU enlargement and neighbourhood policy if common objectives are developed in the European Union that are accepted as binding by every Member State on a permanent basis. Since the initial plans for a European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) at the beginning of the 2000s, the separation of expansion and neighbourhood policy has never worked. The same can be said of the attempts to bring about stability both in the east and south of the EU with the ENP. A key reason for this policy's lack of success is the Union's failure to see neighbourhood policy (including its EU enlargement dimension) as a task actually facing the community – and not as the sum of individual Member States' national interests. The impact of mass migration from the Middle East and Africa is not only felt by the southern or southeastern EU Member States, and the conflict with Russia in Ukraine is not just something for Poland, the eastern Member States and Germany to worry about.

The three countries' long-term political coordination in the field of energy policy is equally important. Their diverging interests and their causes are also extremely well documented in this area. It cannot be denied that an optimally coordinated, common EU policy is the only way to achieve security of supply and ensure that energy costs remain affordable in the long term. With their extremely different points of departure in the area of energy policy, the countries of the Weimar Triangle have a special responsibility with respect to safeguarding a secure energy supply throughout the EU in the future. Whether implementing the European internal energy market or formulating a common energy foreign policy with clear objectives and instruments – both closely connected with a convincing neighbourhood policy – this will only meet with success if Germany, France and Poland can come up with common strategies for European solutions in the sense of compromise by proxy.

³³ The specific proposals for strengthening the Triangle by Kai-Olaf Lang and Daniela Schwarzer can be referred to once again in this regard, although they were formulated in a considerably more positive political context five years ago. See Kai-Olaf Lang and Daniela Schwarzer, »Das Weimarer Dreieck jetzt stärken und nutzen«, SWP-Aktuell 31, Berlin, June 2011.

- In the long term, the Weimar Triangle must assume strategic planning tasks in key EU policy fields such as neighbourhood and energy policy.

Furthermore, under the current difficult circumstances, measures must be taken in the short term in order to foster confidence-building among the governments and to reform the Weimar Triangle so that it is in a position to strengthen the European Union. In contrast to other formats of regional cooperation (e.g. Benelux, Visegrád), the Triangle will continue to be measured according to high standards in the future. Benelux and Visegrád represent regional minorities in the EU; these alliances seek to increase their countries' influence in the EU. Owing to their size and political clout, as well as their different regional significance, the expectations of the Weimar countries' cooperation will always be greater and essentially concern two categories of political action. In the long term, the Weimar Triangle must, first, be able to make an important contribution to mediating and resolving fundamental political conflicts within the EU on the other Member States' behalf. Second, it must be able to inject impetus into the EU to positively influence the Union's long-term development for the benefit of all. This can only be achieved as a supplement to Franco-German relations and not as a substitute for them. These two objectives will not be achieved in the short term owing to the aforementioned reasons; maintaining the dialogue can itself be considered as a success. Despite all of the difficulties and differences of opinion, the coordinates must be set for a realistic yet ambitious policy that is heading in the right direction.

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About the author

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