



THESEUS Conference

The Franco-German couple: Potentials and limitations

Conference Background Paper

Peter Valant, Marie Curie EXACT Fellow

On 22 January 2013 France and Germany will celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty which governs the bilateral relationship between the two member states of the European Union fundamentally. According to this Treaty France and Germany would consult each other on all important issues leading to a common position. This is valid for their bilateral relationship as well as for the European and even multilateral arena.ⁱ No other member state in the European Union got so much attention in symbolic terms. One can argue that their relationship has been inspired and revived by symbols. The march of German troops on the Champs-Élysée on 14 July 1994, the celebration of the continuing Franco-German relationship and friendship in the ceremony of the Palace of Versailles in January 2003 and the famous 'Deauville promenade' of Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel and former French President Nicolas Sarkozy are only a few notable examples.ⁱⁱ Also the new formation of *Merkollande* shows continuity in the sense that French President François Hollande's first foreign visit was to Germany. Being it Franco-German couple, axis or motor for European integration it can be easily argued that their relationship and friendship stands for reconciliation, peace and solidarity. The fundamental values of the famous speech of General Charles de Gaulle at the Ludwigsburg Palace 50 years ago influenced the European peace project essentially.

It is true that crisis situations shed a new light on the Franco-German couple and go beyond traditional intergovernmentalist and neo-functionalist discussions. But the simple argument that the Franco-German axis is the main motor in the power-diffusing system of the European Union undermines the political and institutional complexity of this *sui generis* institution. In the jargon of the European Union, the Franco-German axis or couple needs to be assessed and evaluated with the term *political leadership*. Leadership in form of '**promoting European integration**' – widening and deepening of the European Union - reflects very well the supported understanding of the 'Franco-German motor' for Europe.ⁱⁱⁱ The second form of political leadership focuses on the establishment of subgroups of member states or better known as '**differentiated integration**'.^{iv} The third form of political leadership is '**political crisis management**'. Prominent examples are the 'close cooperation between France and Germany on treaty reform leading to the Lisbon Treaty' or Sarkozy's and Blair's helping hands for Angela Merkel trying to win against Polish resistance and changes in the Council voting rules'.^v Last examples are the currently undertaken efforts to solve the financial and debt crisis in Europe.

Given the fact that the Franco-German performance is arguably the most influential where the mode of decision-making is intergovernmental, the European policy-making modes such as the Community Method and the Union Method also play a vital role in the discussion evaluating the Franco-German role in the European Union.^{vi} Angela Merkel defines the Union Method for the first time in her famous Bruges speech as a ‘coordinated action in a spirit of solidarity – each of us in the area for which we are responsible but all working towards the same goal’.^{vii} The argument whether a shift towards intergovernmental decision-making in the EU institutional system affects the Franco-German leadership position is yet another one to be considered.^{viii} In the literature, the Franco-German relationship is very often examined solely in the Community-framework and much less in the field of CFSP and EU external action. Recent articles examine the weight and power of the Franco-German couple and question whether the Franco-German relationship has lost its *raison d’être*. Conversely, one could argue that with the recent financial sovereign debt crisis the European Council and with it the Franco-German couple is again in the very heart of decision-making. Backed up by this picture I argue that the Franco-German couple promotes the ‘engine of European integration’ and is very active in providing leadership in the European Union.^{ix} The case study of the Eurozone crisis shows that the Franco-German couple reaches to provide leadership despite severe divergences in their own national positions. In another case study, Common Foreign and Security Policy and EU external action, I claim that the Franco-German alliance and thus its leadership is very limited. In this policy domain the Franco-German couple lacks a common *strategic momentum* and thus also leadership. Moreover, other leadership formats emerge with regard to CFSP issues and EU external action, which put the Franco-German couple into an *open relationship*. The fact of non-exclusivity has an influence on both, the Franco-German couple as well as CFSP and EU external action as such.

Leadership over time

Looking back on a time period of 50 years, it can be claimed that the Franco-German relationship had its ups and downs in influencing European integration. Referring to the political leaders it can be stated that with the creation of the European Council in 1974 and the European Monetary System (EMS) in 1979, President Giscard d’Estaing and Chancellor Schmidt were the first leadership couple.^x President Mitterrand and Chancellor Kohl shaped the integrationist agenda further with the internal market and the Single European Act (1986), closer cooperation in the field of security and defence issues in the Maastricht Treaty and the Euro. The period since the Treaty of Maastricht and throughout the 1990s was not integration-driven, as Germany was busy with its unification process and France with exploring its position in a ‘post-cold-war and an enlarged European Union’.^{xi} Hence, in the years 1995-2001 the Chirac-Kohl couple was not very close. In 2002, the Schröder-Chirac agreement on the Common Agricultural Policy and the joint proposals in the constitutional convention seemed to restore the *modus operandi* of the Franco-German relationship.^{xii} However, in the discussion during the Convention on the Future of Europe France and Germany had very diverging positions and different scenarios for the *finalité intérieure* of the European Union. While Germany preferred more power for the European Parliament and direct elections of the President of the European Commission, France preferred to see a strengthened role of the Council with the Council President ‘to become the most important personality within the Union’.^{xiii} Driven by a federalist integrationist approach Germany favoured the role of the President of the European Commission, but not the President of the Council. Despite their diverging positions, France and

Germany found their common view of a Political Union, where both countries then supported the double presidency of the Union, the creation of a so-called double-hatted European foreign affairs minister and a stronger voice of the European Parliament. Next to success stories, the negative outcome of the referenda as regards the Constitutional Treaty held in France and the Netherlands show limits and failures of integrationist influence from top decision-makers. With the Treaty of Lisbon now in force and Angela Merkel and François Hollande representing the Franco-German couple, the challenges and problems did not disappear. On the contrary, the European Union faces the worst internal crisis since its foundation.

Franco-German leadership and the Eurozone crisis

The tackling of the sovereign debt crisis tested the institutional and political framework and certainly was and still is a 'breaking test' for the European Union. The President of the European Council, Herman van Rompuy, stated at the Humboldt University this year: 'In times of crisis we reach the limits of institutions built on attributed competences. When we enter uncharted territory and new rules have to be set, the European Council is well placed to play its part. It is one of the reasons it was founded in the seventies'.^{xiv} Without any doubt the European Council has always played a major role in historic decisions, which then found its entry into the Treaties.^{xv}

Leadership in solving the sovereign debt crisis was for several reasons *prima facie* a leadership-task for France and Germany. First, the Economic and Monetary Union decision 'formed part of a nested game of high-level leadership bargaining, with the Franco-German partnership performing the leading role'.^{xvi} Second, France and Germany are the leading economic forces, their combined GDP and share of ECB capital amounting to 48 percent of the Euro area.^{xvii} Third, the trade-off following the general slower Community-machinery would signify 'high political costs and far reaching political consequences'.^{xviii} Thus, a powerful role of the European Council with strong member states on the lead was an urgent necessity. Despite the mentioned *prima facie* arguments, France and Germany had mostly divergent conceptual approaches on their rocky road to leadership.

Germany's position up to the crisis focused on a stable monetary system underlined by a three-pillar approach, namely 'an independent central bank, the excessive deficit procedure with the Stability and Growth Pact and national competences-based approach as regards fiscal and broader economic policies'.^{xix} During the crisis, on the contrary, Germany is pivotal in agreeing on tighter EU surveillance of economic and fiscal policies.^{xx} France supports 'a banking licence and unlimited access of the European Financial and Stability Facility (EFSF) to European Central Bank funds'.^{xxi} Another keyword is solidarity. The analogy of NATO's Article 5 mutual defence clause applied, the French idea wants to see the other member's solidarity enshrined in case one member is *in danger*.^{xxii} German position, on the contrary, follows the 'no bail-out logic'.^{xxiii}

After the European Commission's presentation of six legislative proposals (so-called Six-Pack), which encompass reform rules for the Stability and Growth Pact as well as a stronger coordination of national economic policies, the *Deauville promenade* of Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy in October 2010 becomes an important –though heavily criticized- bilateral *Alleingang* in the crisis.^{xxiv} Germany with the proposal for a so-called permanent lending facility – European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – risked being isolated in its request for a treaty change.^{xxv} The European Stability

Mechanism shall replace the intergovernmental European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF) and the Union-based European Financial Stabilisation Mechanism (EFSM) by July 2013.

The leadership role of the Franco-German couple sets the agenda for the European Council in October 2010 which agrees on an additional paragraph to Article 136 TFEU stipulating 'member states whose currency is the Euro may establish a stability mechanism to be activated if indispensable to safeguard the stability of the Euro area as a whole'.^{xxvi} When the Eurozone comes to another climax in June and July 2011 and Spain's and Italy's economies are at risk, the Franco-German couple is solid as a rock and takes the lead for the Eurozone's survival.^{xxvii} The common bilateral coordination and regular Franco-German meetings prior to European Summits of June 2011 are a vital silver thread in the EU negotiations.^{xxviii} That's when Nicolas Sarkozy and Angela Merkel get their famous nickname 'Merkozy'.^{xxix}

Another form of Franco-German leadership in promoting European integration is the common bilateral compromise between Angela Merkel and Nicolas Sarkozy found in June 2010 where Merkel presents the idea of 'the European Council acting as an economic government of the EU'.^{xxx} This political shift towards '*economic governance*' within the Euro area is a crucial change for Germany. In the bilateral meeting of June 2010 Merkel expresses the lead of France in defining the term '*economic governance*'. With this German concession to France, Merkel changed the German position since the Maastricht IGC 'of preventing the European Council from being the very heart of decision-making as well as the position of limiting the Eurogroup's performance to an informal club at the level of ministers of finance'.^{xxxi} Merkel points out clearly that 'with the 27 – to avoid division in the single market- we want to create an '*economic government*'.^{xxxii} The Euro Summit of October 2011 agrees on two regular Euro summit meetings per year.^{xxxiii} In the framework of a tighter EU surveillance of economic and fiscal policies, France and Germany agreed on the main objectives of the 'six-pack'.^{xxxiv} The European Council of December 2011 presents the 'fiscal compact' which complements and reinforces the agreed stronger coordination, convergence and enforcement of the economic policy.^{xxxv} The fiscal compact foresees 'automatic consequences for member states in breach of the 3% ceiling by the Commission, unless a qualified majority of Euro area member states is opposed'.^{xxxvi} In the statement of 9 December 2011 the Euro area Heads of State or Government agree on their 'common objective that the ESM enters into force by July 2012', a German concession to France.^{xxxvii}

This *ping-pong* game between France and Germany was successful for several reasons. From a purely national view, France and Germany reached their goal at the European level.^{xxxviii} In terms of leadership, both, with the French '*gouvernance économique*' and the 'German-driven' fiscal compact, were visible leaders. In terms of promoting European integration this is true as well. The strong Franco-German support for the six-pack proposal of the European Commission and thus 'deeper integration in terms of more national commitments in fiscal policy' is a success story.^{xxxix} The 'Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union' is rather to be categorized in the form of leadership promoting differentiation, to overcome British resistance. However, the Franco-German couple wanted to see the Treaty on Stability, Coordination and Governance in the Economic and Monetary Union integrated into primary law.^{xl}

As shown, French and German conceptualisation in the management of the Euro area crisis was very much different from the very beginning. To find a common European compromise is definitely not always an easy task. Thus, the Franco-German leadership should not be taken as granted.^{xli} Much

grounding in the continuity of the Franco-German leadership can be found for the reason of the own national interest of both countries. Opting for bilateral leadership is to a certain extent mostly inevitable for the lack of other choices or alternative forms of cooperation within the EU.^{xlii} This is also seen in the fact that 'Franco-German disputes often seem fierce but do not last long, and can even serve to make people realise how important the relationship is'.^{xliii}

Limitations of the Franco-German alliance – EU External Action and CFSP

When it comes to EU Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) the Franco-German leadership is more limited, mostly because of the sensitivity of the policy issues concerned. The French departure in the early sixties with the 'Fouchet Plan' 'to discover suitable means of organizing closer political cooperation for a progressively developing union' got more opposition than approval.^{xliv} The formulation of a CFSP goes back to a French-German joint proposal in 1990. However, both sides on the Rhine had diverging concepts and still have on a number of issues in the field of CFSP and EU external action.^{xlv}

Germany with its pro-integration path may be ready to consider a power shift towards Brussels in the field of CFSP. France – together with Britain - would not be. The Franco-British partnership supported by the German Council presidency in 1999 helped to achieve some major innovation in EU defence issues. Outlined in the 1999 Cologne communique and adopted as 'Helsinki Headline goals' the Franco-British partnership wanted to build up stronger European forces. This is also a delicate question. While Britain and France are prepared to use military forces beyond Europe, Germany is not.^{xlvi} A close moment in French and German security cooperation was the refusal of the American invasion in Iraq in 2003. Former NATO Ambassador and Defence Secretary Rumsfeld even said that France and Germany are the problem in the EU and that a vast number of other member states are not with France and Germany, but with the United States.^{xlvii} The ESDP mission in Congo is worthwhile remembering where former High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana put immense pressure on Germany to take his leadership role.^{xlviii}

The French-driven proposal of a 'Union for the Mediterranean' has similarities of avoiding further EU enlargement with the 'European Confederation' of former French President François Mitterrand in 1990.^{xlix} Germany also diverged with France in this regard. The disapproval of Merkel and Sarkozy over the 'Union for the Mediterranean' incited Sarkozy to 'postpone the Blaesheim talks, a regular exchange of views by French and German leaders on European issues'.¹

These *à la carte* examples show well that the Franco-German alliance hardly functioned in a consistent manner. Another institutional assumption that the CFSP-framework outside of the Union-basket is more complex to handle leads to the argument that security and defence issues make leadership more difficult. The main element for this inconsistent approach and sometimes lack of leadership (see Iraq 2003, Libya) has mostly its reasons in the national geostrategic policies of France and Germany. In the past, Germany's external relations were governed by its 'bridging functions' within the European Union and as a bridge between Washington and the EU.^{li} The case of Libya shows even a more hesitant German position 'in offering more assertive political leadership'.^{lii} When France and Britain 'launched their offensive in Libya', Germany was on the side of Brazil, India and South Africa to abstain from taking military action.^{liii} President Sarkozy told Germany 'follow me, or don't'.^{liiv} Coming back to the national interests it needs to be said that France has colonial history in

North Africa.^{lv} Germany has not. German hesitation for the ‘use of force’ and to engage beyond Europe combined with diverging national interests makes it difficult to find a common *strategic momentum* for the Franco-German couple. Bendiek argues that EU foreign and security policy is in fact a ‘two-track foreign policy’ in reality, whereas coherence is the vision’.^{lvi} While the Franco-German tandem did not provide enough leadership in CFSP issues, other formations of leadership emerged.

The *EU 3* (Britain, France and Germany) policy towards Iran is one of the examples. Another more recent formation is the German-Polish one. In 2011, Radek Sikorski, the Polish Foreign Minister, said in a speech in Berlin that he fears German power less than he is beginning to fear German inactivity’.^{lvii} In their joint letter the German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle and Radek Sikorski present their ‘new vision of Europe’. Next to institutional innovations they wish for ‘greatly strengthening the Common Security and Defence Policy’.^{lviii} Their statement ‘shying away from military capabilities simply sidelines the EU’ inherits a possible future change of the German position in the European Union. The Future of Europe Group which involves the foreign ministers of eleven member states is another example.^{lix} The latter examples are of course of a much weaker weight taking into consideration that the Foreign Ministers act in a more informal capacity. However, in one way or the other, these formations provide leadership.

With regards to strategic partnerships of the European Union, a leadership format in the European Union is quite difficult as well since the six large member states (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Poland and the UK) pursue their own bilateral strategic partnerships in relation to China.^{lx} Angela Merkel’s visits to China –mostly between the European summit and the EU-China summit- created the picture and questions whether ‘Berlin may have replaced Brussels in Beijing’.^{lxi} Coming back to Bendiek’s ‘two-track foreign policy’ it can be argued that national strategic partnerships with China are so present because of the lack of a ‘comprehensive European approach to China’.^{lxii} Germany for example would favour a ‘top-down’ approach with an active role of the High Representative coordinating major policy issues such as trade or climate change.^{lxiii} Here again – due to the lack of leadership and coherence – new formats are explored.

Looking back to the long-lasting and complex accession negotiations with different positions of the EU member states on Turkey it can be argued that the enlargement process is a highly political issue as well. According to Selim Yenel, Turkey’s EU ambassador, former French leader Nicolas Sarkozy was ‘blocking the chapters concerning EU visa issues for personal reasons and in order to curry favour with right-wing voters’.^{lxiv} Also the German position itself is not consistent and clear in the question of Turkey and its membership which causes tensions due to Westerwelle’s pro-Turkey policy. In this old European dilemma of diverging national positions and a Europeanized enlargement process –mainly driven by the European Commission- the new Turkey-EU positive agenda should deliver new impetus, new answers and ‘fresh dynamics’ to EU-Turkey relations.^{lxv} In other words, EU-Turkey foreign policy cooperation would work better if Turkey’s EU accession track could be revived. The ‘positive agenda’ can be a second way to pursue a European approach with Turkey and to offset the lack of leadership.

Conclusion

Looking at the sovereign debt crisis, as hypothesized, the Franco-German couple is very active in providing leadership and promoting European integration. Their performance in tackling the Euro crisis proves their capacity and importance in the European Union. The Franco-German couple has very much continuity in providing leadership and thus strengthening the integrationist agenda of the EU. According to Jacques Delors the Franco-German alliance is the EU's 'tree of life'. Their joint efforts in 'saving the Euro' and as Merkel argues – the EU as a whole- shows the importance of the Franco-German leadership. When it comes to EU external action and CFSP its limitations are visible. Both, Germany and France are present in other leadership formats. Due to a missing common *strategic momentum* resulting from their divergent national foreign policies, Franco-German leadership is very difficult to achieve. The institutional diversities of the CFSP-framework create in some areas rather a 'two-track' foreign policy than a comprehensive European approach. This *open relationship* and non-exclusivity, which governs the Franco-German relationship, is certainly a reason for the lack of a closer Franco-German relationship. The new European External Action Service, especially CFSP, would definitely require more leadership. A 'two-track' foreign policy is no long-term solution. Global developments such as the rise of China, Turkey's importance as well as other global emerging powers such as the BRIC countries require a coherent European Union. Time will show whether 'other formats' of leadership will establish themselves successfully within the EU or whether the EU's 'tree of life' will gain more importance in CFSP and EU external action as well.

ⁱ Cole, Alistair, *Franco-German Relations: From Active to Reactive Cooperation*, in Hayward, Jack, *Leaderless Europe*, Oxford, 2008, p. 148.

ⁱⁱ *Ibidem*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Schild, Joachim, *Mission Impossible? The Potential for Franco-German Leadership in the Enlarged EU*, JCMS vol. 48 n.5, 2010, p. 1371.

^{iv} *Ibidem*.

^v *Ibidem*.

^{vi} Cole, Alistair, *Franco-German Relations: From Active to Reactive Cooperation*, p. 155.

^{vii} Merkel, Angela, Rede von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel anlässlich der Eröffnung des 61. akademischen Jahres des Europakollegs Brügge, Bruges, 2nd November, retrievable from: <http://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Rede/2010/11/2010-11-02-merkel-bruegge.html>, last accessed: 27/11/12.

^{viii} Wessels, Wolfgang and Höing, Oliver, *New institutional opportunities or old hegemony? The Franco-German tandem in the European Council after Lisbon*, L'Europe en formation, 4 n. 362, 2011.

^{ix} Werts, Jan, *The European Council*, John Harper Publishing, 2008.

^x Cole, Alistair, *Franco-German Relations: From Active to Reactive Cooperation*, p. 151.

^{xi} *Ibidem*.

^{xii} Heisbourg, François, *The French-German Duo and the Search for a New European Security Model*, The International Spectator, 3/2004, p. 66.

^{xiii} Cole, Alistair, *Franco-German Relations: From Active to Reactive Cooperation*, p. 156.

^{xiv} de Schoutheete, Philippe, *The European Council and the Community Method*, Notre Europe, Policy Paper n.56, p.20.

^{xv} Wessels, Wolfgang, *Europäischer Rat*, in Wessels, Wolfgang and Weidenfeld, Werner (Ed.), *Europa von A bis Z. Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft*, 2006.

^{xvi} Cole, Alistair, *Franco-German Relations: From Active to Reactive Cooperation*, p. 158.

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- ^{xvii} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, Paper presented at the UACES Conference, Passau, 3-5 September 2012.
- ^{xviii} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, p.4.
- ^{xix} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, p.5.
- ^{xx} EU Economic governance: a major step forward, MEMO/11/364. *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxi} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, p.8.
- ^{xxii} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxiii} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxiv} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxv} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxvi} European Council Conclusions, October 2010. *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxvii} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxix} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, p.12.
- ^{xxx} <http://www.france-allemande.fr/Bundeskanzlerin-Merkel-trifft,5591.html>. *Ibidem*
- ^{xxxi} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*, p.14.
- ^{xxxii} <http://www.france-allemande.fr/Bundeskanzlerin-Merkel-trifft,5591.html>. *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxxiii} http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/125644.pdf.
- ^{xxxiv} EU Economic Governance: a major step forward, MEMO/ /11/364.
- ^{xxxv} http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/133004.pdf. Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*.
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- ^{xxxvii} http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/126658.pdf. *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxxviii} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xxxix} Schild Joachim, *Leadership in Hard Times: France, Germany and the Management of the Eurozone Crisis*.
- ^{xl} *Ibidem*.
- ^{xli} *Ibidem*.
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- ^{xliii} Guérot , Ulrike, *Getting the Franco-German engine back into gear*, http://www.europesworld.org/NewEnglish/Home_old/Article/tabid/191/ArticleType/articleview/ArticleID/20944/language/en-US/Default.aspx
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- ^{xlvii} <http://edition.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/meast/01/22/sprj.irq.wrap>.
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- ^{lv} *Ibidem*.
- ^{lvi} *Ibidem*.

^{lvii} Guérot , Ulrike and Gebert, Konstanty, Why Poland is the new France for Germany, 17/102012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ulrike-guerot-konstanty-gebert/why-poland-is-new-france-for-germany>.

^{lviii} “A New Vision for Europe” (Article by the Foreign Ministers Westerwelle and Sikorski), http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/sid_48569B625D772B7F61704A5E73844BDF/EN/Infoservice/Presse/Interview/2012/120917-BM-Sikorski-VisionEurope.html?nn=626352.

^{lix} *Ibidem*.

^{lx} Kundnani, Hans and Parello-Plesner, Jonas, *China and Germany: Why the emerging special relationship matters for Europe*, European Council on Foreign Relations, n. 55, 2012.

^{lxi} *Ibidem*.

^{lxii} *Ibidem*.

^{lxiii} *Ibidem*.

^{lxiv} <http://euobserver.com/enlargement/116678>.

^{lxv} Remarks by Commissioner Füle after the first working group on chapter 23 with Turkey, MEMO/12/360.