



WORKSHOP REPORT

The Franco-German couple – leadership malgré nous et vous? Franco-German relationship seen from the outside

17-18 February 2011, Brussels

The workshop “The Franco-German couple – leadership malgré nous et vous? Franco-German relationship seen from the outside” organised in the context of the THESEUS project by the Trans European Policy Studies Association (TEPSA) in cooperation with the University of Cologne, the Centre d’études européennes Sciences Po Paris and the Institut für Europäische Politik (IEP) Berlin, took place in Brussels on 17-18 February 2011. The workshop focused on the role and the perceptions of the Franco-German couple in European integration as seen from the other countries of the European Union (EU). The participants of the workshop discussed the topic in the context of the historical development of EU integration, the future economic governance and fiscal coordination in the EU, the enlargement policy and external action, the reform of the EU budget, and their leadership over time. The workshop was opened on Thursday 17th February 2011 with a welcome address by hosting organiser *Mirte van den Berge* (TEPSA) and co-organizer *Anja Thomas* (THESEUS).

The introductory discussion, chaired by *Jean-Victor Louis* (TEPSA), focused on the Franco-German couple in the historical context of EU integration and its role regarding the evolution of the EU decision-making process. *Joachim Schild* (University of Trier) started his presentation by pointing out the different possible angles to assess the Franco-German relations, such as leadership, differences over time, actors involved and academic perspectives. Although it has been a common wisdom in the past that no major advances in European integration can be achieved without the involvement of both France and Germany, *Joachim Schild* sees the Maastricht Treaty as a watershed after which increasing divergences in Franco-German relations occurred. Nowadays the combined weight of France and Germany alone is not sufficient to build a constructive majority in the EU. According to him, political actors in general ascribe a more important role to the couple than academic observers. Moreover, *Joachim Schild* underlined that France and Germany assign more significance to their influence than actors do. This behaviour can be seen as a “functional myth” which sets normative standards in Franco-German and European relations. Comparing the impact of the Franco-German alliance on certain policy fields, he stated that while for instance on market regulations there is no dominant influence of the couple visible, in areas like monetary policy their role is indeed crucial. He emphasized that during the last ten years the couple was sometimes less productive and more protective in EU policy formulation and implementation. In his final remarks he gave arguments in favour of a still important and again increasing role of Franco-German cooperation, as evidenced by the rising importance of the European Council and the declining role of the European Commission. He came to the conclusion that under certain, especially domestic circumstances, a leadership role of France and Germany is today still in many EU policy fields possible and needed. *Jean-Victor Louis* agreed that the Franco-German couple is still very powerful regarding blocking certain discussions and that it is evident that the duo is stronger in intergovernmental policy fields because in other areas the Commission plays a far greater role. He argued that in order to reach an agreement, France and Germany need strong European oriented leaders in their respective governments. The subsequent discussion focused *inter alia* on security aspects of the Franco-German couple and the relation to the United

Kingdom. Participants emphasized the importance of French-British agreements in this field, shown by the St Malo agreement in 1998 and the recent increase in common military and armament policy initiatives.

The first panel of the workshop dealt with the Franco-German couple and the future economic governance and fiscal coordination in the EU and was chaired by *Brendan Donnelly* (Federal Trust). The first speaker *Iain Begg* (LSE) started his presentation by comparing cases of European integration in which France and Germany have a common position to which other EU countries must adapt, such as the CAP, and cases in which their discord can be exploited by other EU countries, such as the evolution of the GSP. He outlined the principles of the two maybe incompatible philosophies of “Economic Governance” and “Gouvernement Economique”. By briefly analysing their response to the 2010 Euro crisis, he argued that the Franco-German couple at first only slowly recognized the scope of threats and later reacted by using the opportunity to strengthen economic governance, albeit with a clear intergovernmental emphasis and accompanied by serious communication blunders. It however seems that the Euro crisis was seized by EU institutions more than by the couple as for instance the significant role of the European Commission, the task force and the ECOFIN Council indicate. *Iain Begg* further summarized reform tasks in EU economic and monetary policy that can be labelled as “finished”, for instance a better conceived GSP, and “unfinished”, such as the credibility of sanctions. He concluded his presentation with the theses that Germany’s role in the crisis is more pivotal than France’s, while largely dominated by domestic issues. His other conclusion was that both countries were slow to recognise threats but are now clearly determined to underpin the Euro, and that it will be rather the Commission than the couple to lead reforms in addressing unfinished tasks. *Jean-Victor Louis* then drew the attention to the role of the Belgian Presidency of the Council during the second half of 2010 and the Belgian perspective on the Franco-German couple. According to his view, the Belgian Presidency did not push own priorities but rather supported the Commission and the European Parliament, and continued to build the post-Lisbon institutional framework, especially focusing on the set up of the European External Action Service (EEAS). However, regarding economic reforms in the context of the Euro crisis, the Belgian Presidency kept a rather low profile and did not contribute significantly, which left room for manoeuvre for other actors like the Franco-German couple to come in. Moreover, *Jean-Victor Louis* elaborated on the non-acceptance of certain reform proposals, which violate Belgians inflation law and how the Euro reform pact has changed Belgians opinion on the application of the community method. Subsequently *Shane Fitzgerald* (IIEA) presented the recent Irish situation and the perceptions of the Irish public and elite on the role of France and Germany. After outlining the triggers and the evolution of the Irish banking crisis, he concentrated on its impact on EU monetary policy. According to his view, reform proposals, especially demands from the German side to increase Ireland’s corporate tax, had tremendous negative consequences on financial markets and were not well received by the Irish public. Moreover, the Franco-German disregard of the community method in the context of the proposal for economic governance was noticed in Ireland. He concluded by stressing the Irish view that the leadership of France and Germany is needed and welcomed in Ireland but the EU treaties and institutions have to be respected by the couple. The following discussion laid the focus on an assessment of the leadership of the tandem on the one side and other actors like the Commission on the other side regarding the development of political answers to the Euro crisis in 2010. The participants then discussed the differing views on the Franco-German couple from some of their own countries perspectives. It was argued that, *inter alia*, Sweden is rather sceptical of the proposed reforms by France and Germany, while Slovenia supports them in general and sees the debt issue as an important element that has to be addressed in the future.

The policy fields of enlargement and external action and Franco-German initiatives in these spheres were the topic of the second panel. The chair *Gunilla Herolf* (SIPRI) started by giving the



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general positive Swedish view on the Franco-German tandem but stated that it is considered rather as a needed engine, which has a facilitating role in EU affairs than as a true leader of the EU. The first speaker of the panel, *Katrin Böttger* (IEP) stressed the convergent development of Franco-German consent on EU enlargement policy. She argued that the current circumstances are unfavourable for a strong leading role of the duo. While the public in both countries is hesitant of further enlargements, the process itself is rather formalised and thus not subject to short-term initiatives. She outlined the “enlargement fatigue” and that in contrast to previous enlargements, France and Germany are now rather trying to hamper the process than to accelerate it. By focusing on Franco-German attitudes towards a possible accession of Western Balkan countries and Turkey, she further underlined the current reluctant standing of the duo in this policy field. *Atila Eralp* (CES) then shed light on the Turkish accession process in which a contextual shift was observable resulting in a downturn of the negotiations, due also to factors like the imbalance between deepening and widening and an institutional stalemate at EU level. *Atila Eralp* emphasized the important domestic aspects of Turkish accession in France and Germany such as an increased public involvement, national debates on the “Europeanness” of Turkey and its embeddedness into the wider “Islam vs. the West” discussion. From the Turkish point of view, there is an increased resentment towards the braking role of the Franco-German couple. Moreover, over the recent years the foreign policy goals of the EU and Turkey became more divergent, with Turkey claiming a more independent regional role for itself. By highlighting the need for a better output orientation of the EU in a changing international environment and the vital role of Franco-German relations in that matter, *Atila Eralp* concluded his presentation. *Elfriede Regelsberger* (IEP) focused her remarks on the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) for which the Franco-German couple can be considered as “a motor without a monopoly”. In order to analyse the role of the two countries in CFSP, different levels have to be taken into consideration, such as the readings of the German Federal Constitutional Court, ideas of a “core Europe” or “Europe à la carte” and the impact of the Lisbon Treaty with its new provisions and institutional innovations in the sphere under study. By making reference to the introduction of the new post of the High Representative, Permanent Structured Cooperation and an enhancing of Qualified Majority Voting, *Elfriede Regelsberger* outlined the many Franco-German initiatives in recent CFSP evolution. Crucial former differences regarding certain policies however still persist as shown for instance by the cases of the Mediterranean Union, EU-Russia relations or CFSP missions in Africa. Furthermore, she accentuated further possible core groups in CFSP. While the group of the EU-3 (D, F, UK) in negotiations with Iran is accepted by all EU member states, other core groups are met with scepticism, such as the Weimar triangle or French-British cooperation in military aspects. Finally she questioned if the development of areas of increased cooperation of only a limited number of EU member states and its relation to Franco-German relations can be considered as rather beneficiary or detrimental for European integration as a whole. *Michele Comelli* (IAI) subsequently argued that instead of speaking of a true Franco-German coalition in CFSP, one should rather incorporate the UK and refer to the EU-3 as the dominant force in this part of European integration. Evidence for this these can be found by looking at the examples of the evolution following St Malo, the battle group concept or the negotiations with Iran. Although France and Germany were considered crucial actors in the past in the development of CFSP, nowadays many initiatives are put forward by other actors. The example of the European Neighbourhood Policy shows how other EU member states shifted the focus to certain neighbouring parts of the EU over time. In addition, *Michele Comelli* outlined the differing concepts of borders that France and Germany apply. Finally he expressed the Italian fears that the Franco-German couple continues to construct a dominant alliance in CFSP with the UK and thus possibly diminish the influence of Italy. During the following discussion most participants agreed that the impact of the Franco-German couple on CFSP issues is lesser compared to other EU policy fields. Instead of a driving force of European integration, the duo sometimes even seems to rather obstruct certain procedures as evidenced by their recent role in further EU enlargements.



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During the dinner at the Permanent Representation of the Federal Republic of Germany to the EU on Thursday evening, *Roland Schäfer* (Minister, Deputy Head of political affairs, Permanent Representation of Federal Republic of Germany to the EU, Brussels) and *Gaël Veysseyre* (Head of Press Department, Permanent Representation of France to the EU) held brief speeches on the Franco-German alliance and their role in European integration. *Minister Roland Schäfer* recalled the importance of the historical dimension of a strong and durable relationship between France and Germany both for the countries themselves and for Europe as a whole. Although he admitted that certain controversial opinions regarding questions of EU affairs are always found in the alliance, the couple still lies at the heart of EU policy-making. *Gaël Veysseyre* supported these notions and located the mutual fascination of France and Germany also in their cultural and political differences. A recent example concerns the different readings of economic governance at the EU level. He defended the rather intergovernmental approach of the French and German governments in this context and stated that it will lead to some sort of supranationalisation in the long run.

The workshop continued on Friday 18th February 2011 with a third panel on France and Germany and the reform of the EU budget. The chair *Daniel Vernet* ("Boulevard Extérieur") gave a brief introduction into the negotiations of the upcoming financial perspective for 2014 to 2020 and argued that two central issues stand out in the debate: first the consensus among the net payers of the Union that there should not be a significant increase of the EU budget, and secondly possible changes in certain important budget items, such as the CAP, the cohesion funds and the British rebate. First speaker *Karlis Bukovskis* (LIIA) expressed the views of Latvian politicians who consider it difficult to find an active position regarding EU budget negotiations as long as there is no clear position of the Franco-German tandem. Due to limited human resources to influence the process, Latvia's general position is rather reactive. Worries of Latvia relate especially to reforms of cohesion policy. Here Latvia's position is closer to the one of Germany by fearing that there could be substantial cuts in this budget item. In contrast, the Latvian government supports partly the French position regarding the CAP and claims that it has to be kept, although in a reformed and restructured way. *Brendan Donnelly* focused on obstacles and problems regarding the reform of the EU budget and the partial responsibility of the Franco-German couple for that. He argued that the feeling of solidarity in the EU has diminished over the years and a general "what will we get back?"-mentality overshadows all negotiations. Due to the requirement of unanimity among the EU member states to adopt the financial perspective, no real reform of for instance the CAP seems to be possible. The role of France and Germany in this regard can be characterized as rather blocking needed reforms. The presentation of *Mojmir Mrak* (University of Economics, Ljubljana) put the perspective on the development of the EU budget negotiations over the last ten years. By outlining first the negotiations that took place in 2003 to 2005, he sketched the frictions between the net payer countries on the one side and the "cohesion group" of EU member states on the other side that led to an agreement on a budget review. He further predicted that in terms of size, we cannot expect a higher EU budget, maybe even less than a 1% increase, with the upcoming fixing of expenditures in 2013. Moreover, one cannot expect major changes in the budget structure. Concerning the role of France and Germany in this area, he stated that there is no leading role of the two countries visible, but that the two countries build a trio together with the UK, although not in a way that can be considered as a core group. Subsequently *Zsuzsánna Biedermann* (IWE) drew the attention to the Hungarian view on the topic. Whilst Hungary can in principle understand the concerns of the net payer countries, it worries that much needed reform steps may not be achieved if a serious restructuring of the budget does not take place in the near future. In order to address crucial threats such as climate change and an ageing European population and regarding the unwillingness of the net payers to increase the EU budget, the CAP, British rebate, and cohesion policy need to be reformed. Hungary argues for a balance of old and new policy fields in the EU budget and stresses the spirit of solidarity on which the EU is



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founded. In the following discussion the participants agreed that there is an expectation-capability gap observable regarding the increased tasks of the Union after the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty, such as the establishment of the European External Action Service, and a lack of will to finance the reforms. In this regard reflections on new ways of allocating resources at the EU level were made.

The final roundtable of the workshop, chaired by *Gianni Bonvicini* (IAI), discussed the Franco-German couple leadership over time. First, *Vit Beneš* (IIR) elaborated on occurring perceptions of France and Germany in the Czech Republic. According to his view, the role of the couple is overestimated in the Czech Republic. Resulting out of Czech self-perception of geopolitical insecurity and historical concerns, the Czech public opinion fears and distrusts the role and intentions of the great powers of Europe, including France and Germany. He stressed the general trend of Czech exceptionalism, which includes the consideration of being the true “heart” of Europe, representing core European values and a moral sense of mission to “teach” the other European countries. According to him, this Czech exceptionalism leads to isolationism, currently represented most prominently by the Czech president Klaus. *Renaud Dehousse* (Sciences Po) started his presentation by expressing the opposite view of Belgium that nowadays feels far lesser threatened by France and Germany than in the past. In the following he raised three hypotheses on a possible future Franco-German relationship in the EU framework. First, due to a certain path-dependency the two countries are used to consult each other and work together, so their first reflex is always to look for the position of one another. Secondly, given the fact that in an EU consisting of 27 member states, initiatives need a strong alliance to be put forward and currently there is no alternative coalition to the Franco-German tandem visible. Thirdly, what makes cooperation between France and Germany so fundamental is that they are so different. When they finally reach an agreement almost mechanically all the other members can join the consensus without further objections. In his function as the final speaker of the panel, *Wolfgang Wessels* (University of Cologne) raised the question if the Franco-German couple is that important at all, since in everyday policy-making processes at the EU level it does not play a great role. He however added for consideration that in times of crisis, the tandem is still crucial and often issues new initiative. Furthermore, he discussed possible motivations of the couple for wanting to lead the integration progress and expressed his surprise that many speakers still today start with questions of war and peace in Europe. He asked if for that matter European integration is still necessary and if a common European identity can be detected. Subsequently he drew the attention to a political scientist view of integrative balancing on why Germany was prevented from rising to a threatening power again. He further sketched two possible future developments of the tandem. While a more pessimistic point of view argues that France and Germany will defensively try to maintain the status quo of European integration without giving new impulses, an optimistic perspective holds the belief that after further stress tests like the current Euro crisis, the Franco-German couple will again try to take up challenges constructively. After the presentations of the speakers were held, the discussion among the participants concentrated on questions of European identity, borders and values in relation to the role of the couple.

In his concluding remarks on the workshop, *Wolfgang Wessels* took up the discussion on European identity and outlined different related identity constructs in particular EU member states. He looked back on the spill-over process of European Integration that started in the 1950s and asked how it is put into effect by France and Germany today. *Gianni Bonvicini* summarized the central finding of the workshop that the Franco-German couple is still a crucial coalition in many policy fields of European Integration, although new challenges nowadays and in the future constantly force the tandem to adapt and develop their significant role.



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