EU unity first, strategic visions second – Germany’s EU coalition building after the Brexit referendum

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If there has been one central characteristic of Germany’s foreign policy since the end of World War Two it is Germany’s embeddedness in multilateral structures and alliances. For historical and geo-strategic reasons Germany’s political institutions and policies are inextricably linked with the European Union. The same applies to the backbone of Germany’s net of intra-EU partnerships, the Franco-German tandem. While academics and policy analysts have often portrayed Germany as a “reluctant hegemon”, German policy-makers have rather labelled this mode of agenda-setting and decision-making in a positive way as integrationist or inclusive. At the 2015 Munich Security Conference, Ursula von der Leyen, Federal Minister of Defense at the time, called it “leading from the centre”. While the Franco-German tandem dates far back in time, it has not necessarily lived up to external expectations in the sense that France and Germany have not always managed to provide joint impulses for EU cooperation – let alone fulfilling the role of a motor for European integration. Especially in the context of the Eurozone crisis and with regard to Economic governance instruments there has been a considerable asymmetry in the partnership. While Germany has often been perceived as the de facto decision-making power due to its political stability and economic strength, France was considered to serve as a junior partner at best – a dynamic which might change with French President Emmanuel Macron taking ownership for a pro-active European agenda and Germany being politically weakened after the federal elections on 24 September 2017. However, despite of imbalances and structurally diverging perspectives and priorities on some EU policies, France has been the default partner for Germany in the EU which materialized in a number of institutional arrangements and cooperation formats like the annual joint ministerial council meetings, personnel exchange schemes or consultation prior to EU Council meetings in order to formalize collaboration and exchange between French and German political actors and officials. Equally, other EU member states and EU institutional actors are well aware that a functioning Franco-German relationship is the minimum requirement for EU cooperation to work: it is necessary but not sufficient in order to grant EU coherence, actorness and legitimacy.

Consequently, Germany and France together have been part of further cooperation formats and coalitions – some more long-term, others being more ad-hoc depending on the policy under discussion or the respective crisis at the European horizon. Among the more long-term coalitions it is worth mentioning the Weimar Triangle that brings together Germany, France and Poland: not so much for its substance or past achievements which are very rare, but for its reflection of Germany’s self-understanding as serving as a bridge between the East and the South, and the potential that German policy-makers have seen in the format. In theory, the Weimar Triangle is thus the ideal format for Germany because it embodies the nexus between Germany’s close partnership with France and its traditionally close political and economic...
ties with Central and Eastern Europe. However, while there were efforts to revitalize the Weimar Triangle there has been hardly any activity since the PiS government in Poland has come to power in 2015. Despite of frosty bilateral relations Germany still aims to keep the dialogue with Poland going as policy-makers in Berlin are well aware that Poland is an indispensable partner in the EU.

In the context of the “future of the EU debate” which was triggered by the Brexit referendum, the outspoken opposition of the V4 and some other Central-Eastern EU member states to binding relocation schemes in the refugee crisis as well as the difficult to formulate a joint EU-wide response to rule of law violations in Poland and Hungary, the group of EU founding members has also gained in importance again – depending on the issue including Spain. The UK has been an important partner in the past with regard to foreign policy or the Single Market.

While the close affiliation with countries like France, Italy, Spain, the UK and Poland can be interpreted as typical power games among the big players it is worth mentioning that there has been an increasing awareness of the need for the inclusion and consultation of smaller EU member states from Germany’s side – more so than can be said for France, for example. While France has often envisioned and shaped European policies and initiatives around coalitions of the ‘big shots’ Germany has admonished to not forget about small and medium-sized countries, at least rhetorically. In practice, this German inclusive policy has often had a rather symbolic character as could be seen with Merkel’s tour to different EU capitals in the run-up to the Bratislava summit in September 2016. But there is also some substance to it. For instance, Angela Merkel has been more hesitant with regard to promoting a “two-speed” Europe while French President Emmanuel Macron explicitly and forcefully advocated this idea in his “future of the EU” speech at Sorbonne University. Differing visions on CSDP are another example with Germany traditionally being more outspoken in favour of a modular PESCO approach that includes small member state contributions compared to France.

This German sensitivity has further increased after the Brexit referendum and the emergence of a perceived East-West divide in the context of the refugee crisis. Germany is well aware that the UK is going to leave a vacuum in the EU with its liberal market approach, its anti-federalist stance on EU institutional reforms, its strong actorness in foreign and security policy and the tough stance on Russia. Amongst other things, this means that many smaller and medium-sized EU member states like the Baltics, the V4, the Benelux countries will lose an important ally in a range of policies which they perceived as a counter balance to Germany and France. In the ongoing crisis context Germany came to realize that the EU cannot afford to lose those countries and that they need to feel represented in order to grant or rather restore EU cohesion which is the condition for an EU that can also present itself as a strong actor in the European neighbourhood and beyond. At the same time, Germany’s political culture is closer to countries like the Netherlands, the Nordics and Baltics than France or other Southern EU countries in many regards, in particular on fiscal prudence and visions for Eurozone integration more broadly. The biggest challenge for Germany will thus be to accommodate those diverse concerns and preferences of smaller member states when
sketching an image for the future of the EU and at the same time to trying to enable and support at least parts of Macron’s ambitious European agenda.

This exercise will be further complicated by the German election results and the perspective of lengthy coalition negotiations. It is far from certain that the CDU/CSU will succeed in drafting a common political agenda with the Liberals (FDP) and the Green party which will be sufficiently solid and coherent in order to establish the first “Jamaica coalition” on the federal level. Even though a range of major differences between the parties refer to domestic issues like taxation, the priorities on EU affairs also vary on a number of policies. The most visible and politicized difference refers to the past assessment of how Merkel handled the refugee crisis in 2015 and lessons to be drawn for the future. Due to severe losses in the federal elections and upcoming federal states elections in Bavaria in 2018 the CSU has announced to close the CDU/CSU’s “right flank” by insisting on fixed upper limits for incoming refugees, by further skipping family reunification and by speeding up deportation procedures for migrants whose asylum status has been denied. The CDU, on the other hand, is increasingly divided on the issue with Merkel’s status in the party being challenged by some party-internal groups. While Chancellor Merkel herself still opposes any fixed upper limits, other parts of the CDU have been rather following the CSU line. The Greens, on the other hand, form a strong opposing pole in that regard. While they have also spoken out in favour of deporting refused asylum seekers they have refused to declare the Maghreb countries as safe countries of origin and are against any fixed upper limits.

Another issue where party preferences will be hard to reconcile is the future of the EU and, most importantly, the French vision for Eurozone reforms – including a sufficiently big Eurozone budget and a Eurozone Finance Minister. Christian Lindner, head of the FDP, declared right after the election that a Eurozone budget that from his perspective would de facto equal intra-European redistribution and subsidizing Southern European countries will be red line for the Liberals while Cem Özdemir, one of two Green party top candidates in the election, admonished to be open for Macron’s suggestions. It is therefore not to be expected that Germany will be in a position to actively push for any far reaching EU reforms any time soon. The priority will be to keep the EU united as far as possible with regard to Brexit negotiations – an issue that is not controversial in the German discourse.

On top of policy-specific questions, political actors in Berlin will also be busy to adapt to the strong presence of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) on the political stage. While the AfD political group in the Bundestag is too small to block any major decisions by themselves the new distribution of seats might make the formation of a two third majority harder than before which might be necessary for any potential constitutional EU amendments. Most of all, the presence and by far higher visibility of AfD positions as well as potential party-internal power struggles will have an impact on the perception of Merkel’s leeway and power on the European level.
About the author

Anna-Lena KIRCH is an Associate Fellow at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP). Previously she worked in the Europe program of the German Marshall Fund of the United States (2014–17), in the research division for EU integration at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) (2012–13), and in the European Parliament as a trainee of French MEP Sylvie Goulard. Kirch focuses on the discourse about the “future of the EU” and on processes of differentiated integration in a European context. Her further areas of research are German foreign policy, European Neighborhood Policy, and the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia). She is currently completing her PhD at Justus Liebig University in Gießen with a focus on “subregional cooperation formats in the EU.” She studied political science and communications at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz. During her MA studies, she worked in Mainz University’s department of political science and at the Goethe Institute in Glasgow.

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