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POLSKI INSTYTUT SPRAW MIĘDZYNARODOWYCH
THE POLISH INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

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NO. 5 (126), FEBRUARY 2023 © PISM

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Tandem Faces an Uncertain Future: Franco-German Relations in a Time of War and Inflation

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The COVID-19 pandemic and the crises caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine represent the most serious test for the Franco-German tandem since the creation of the EU. Leaders in both countries share a conviction of the necessity of mutual cooperation, further increased by the compromise worked out around the EU's post-pandemic recovery plan. However, the catalogue of divergences between France and Germany is long and includes crucial issues such as the shape of the common market, energy policy, and defence. A possible permanent loosening of the tandem may benefit Poland, but only on the condition that the country maintains constructive relations with France and Germany, cooperates well with EU institutions, and correctly diagnoses Polish interests in the areas of the Franco-German dispute.

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The cooperation between France and Germany is linked to the process of reconciliation after the Second World War, with the Elysée Treaty of 1963 laying the foundations for it. The Franco-German tandem played a decisive role in the creation of the EU in 1992 and the euro single currency in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and in the enlargement of the community in 2004. Post-war reconciliation, according to politicians of both countries, brought with it the special responsibility of setting the course of European integration and controlling this process.

The Franco-German tandem played a decisive role in the creation of the EU in 1992 and the euro single currency, and in the enlargement of the community in 2004.

The political dimension has been accompanied by close links between the EU's two largest economies. France and Germany's merchandise trade amounts to €149.2 billion. Since 2017, Germany has been the top trading partner for France, while France ranks fourth among Germany's partners.¹

A feature that permanently distinguishes the two economies is the high trade deficit on the French side (€84.8 billion in 2021) and the high surplus on the German side (€176 billion in 2021).² This contrast is the subject of frequent discussion in France, leading to accusations that Germany is pursuing a policy of impoverishing its neighbours by over-promoting exports. In response to these arguments, Germany highlights the lack of reform of the French social system and lower productivity, which undermines the competitiveness of the French economy.

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From the Sorbonne to Aachen: In Search of a Common Agenda

At the time Emmanuel Macron was first elected president of France in spring 2017, the country was in a state of acute internal crisis caused by a wave of ISIS-inspired terrorist attacks on its territory.³ Internal French and European criticism of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's acceptance of the wave of migration from the Middle East in 2015 and the protracted negotiation process before the formation of her fourth government weakened Germany's position in turn.

In international politics, the tandem had to deal with the consequences of the British decision to leave the EU, as well as the rise of Eurosceptic sentiment in France, Germany, and Poland, among others. The Donald Trump presidency that began in 2017, geared towards economic confrontation with the EU and undermining trust in NATO, also posed a challenge.

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Internal and international problems formed the backdrop of Macron's speech at the Sorbonne on 25 September 2017, in which he included a vision for EU reform and called on Germany to cooperate with France. Macron's aim was to simultaneously emphasise Germany's role as France's privileged partner but with France taking the lead on integration issues. Macron envisaged tightening integration within the eurozone

by creating a common budget of "a few percent" of EU GDP for investment and protection against the effects of crises. The French president also proposed, among other things, a common EU defence budget and the integration of social policies.

¹ "Trade in goods by top 5 partners," *Eurostat*, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/international-trade-in-goods/visualisations>.

² "Solde de la balance commerciale en biens," *INSEE*, www.insee.fr; "Außenhandel Rangfolge der Handelspartner im Außenhandel der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (endgültige Ergebnisse)," *Destatis*, www.destatis.de.

³ H. Micheron, "Le jihadisme français: Quartiers, Syrie, prisons," *Gallimard*, 2020.

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These ideas, especially the eurozone budget, were intended to indicate that it is France that sets the tone for European integration and that it is an effective representative of the interests of its southern neighbours, struggling with economic problems. Germany, like the northern EU countries, feared that a common budget would mean financial transfers to southern countries without the required reforms.⁴ Neither did non-Euro countries see any benefit for themselves from the idea. Chancellor Merkel's reaction to Macron's proposals remained restrained for months.

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It was only on 19 June 2018 in Meseberg that the two leaders signed a joint declaration containing some of the Sorbonne demands, confirming the willingness to create a common eurozone budget, harmonise migration and asylum policies, establish an EU asylum office, as well as closer coordination of foreign and security policy and to move away from the principle of unanimity in voting in those areas. The rather vague nature of the document, though, left both leaders with considerable room for manoeuvre.⁵

The desire to strengthen cooperation between the two countries was confirmed by the Treaty of Aachen of 22 January 2019, which aimed to guarantee the closest possible coordination between the foreign and European policies of France and Germany. Its provisions were part of France's policy of presenting itself as the initiator of the concept of "Europe as a superpower". A success for Germany was the French support for the German bid for a seat on the UN Security Council. The Franco-German Council of Economists, established by the treaty, also plays an important role for the tandem, with the aim of agreeing positions on the question of the shape of the common market, an issue that divides the two countries.

Overcoming the Pandemic and Differences in Policy Towards Russia: Cooperation that Breeds Conflict

The economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine provided the strongest impetus in 2020-2022 to change the status quo in the EU in a number of areas, from violating the taboo around joint debt to explicitly defining Russia as a strategic adversary of the Union. These two events simultaneously catalysed the ongoing disagreements between France and Germany, as they sharpened the importance of conflicts of economic and strategic interests between them.

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Tackling the Effects of the Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic, which was a major disruption to the global economy, triggered reflection by Member States on the need for a coordinated EU response. Its aim was to save jobs and industrial sectors, especially in those countries that had been affected in previous years by deindustrialisation and the substitution of domestic production by foreign output (relocation). One idea was joint indebtedness, which, in the form of the idea of Eurobonds, was promoted by a group of countries in the southern part of the EU during the financial crisis of 2008-2011. Among the strong opponents of

⁴ L. Gibadło, S. Płóciennik, "Europe's Engine' Seizing Up. French-German Relations during the Polycrisis," *OSW Commentary*, 19 January 2023, www.osw.waw.pl.

⁵ J.Szymańska, S. Płóciennik, "Meseberg Declaration—France, Germany Present Their EU Reform Plan," *PISM Spotlight*, 46/2018, 20 June 2018 r. www.pism.pl.

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this idea, which de facto was a kind of redistribution between Member States, were the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, Austria, and Germany.

In addition to fears of creating a precedent of permanent financing of the economies of less efficient EU members, the German authorities were also concerned about treaty amendment procedures and the consequences of a possible declaration by the Federal Constitutional Court that this solution was unconstitutional.⁶

Germany's criticism of the concept of Eurobonds was also due to domestic political considerations, as the majority of public opinion was against it and Chancellor Merkel feared a rise in support for the far-right party, Alternative for Germany (AfD).⁷

France's attitude to the idea of joint debt was more complicated. The idea was not among the EU reform proposals put forward by Macron in 2017, probably due to the anticipated difficulty of convincing Germany of it. Shared debt in French politics has always been supported by the left and understood as a way to strengthen France's role in the EU by representing the interests of countries from the south of the Community. The pandemic, however, gave sufficient impetus to convince Germany of this idea and thus present France as a country effectively taking the initiative.

Discussions on overcoming the economic impact of the pandemic coincided with the German presidency of the Council of the EU in the second half of 2020. In this situation, the rebuilding of the EU economy, including the energy transition and digitalisation, became the priorities for Chancellor Merkel. Their implementation, and at the same time the success of the entire presidency, required both an agreement with France and the development of a compromise by Germany between the northern and southern EU states.⁸

A joint initiative became possible when France accepted that Germany regarded Eurobonds as a one-off tool intended only to finance investments and not to pay off old debts. The announcement on 18 May 2020 by Macron and Merkel of an agreement on a recovery plan based on joint debt (amounting to €500 billion and eventually €750 billion) was a major political victory for the French president after long months of frustration at the lack of agreement with Germany and the half-hearted results from Meseberg.

This arrangement was confirmed in July 2020 at the European Council summit during which the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework for 2021-2027 was adopted. The leaders of both countries succeeded in convincing the northern European states to change their position. In line with the priorities of the German presidency, some of the funds were to be allocated to digitalisation and green projects.⁹ These decisions confirmed both Germany's key position in the EU and Merkel's role as an initiator of compromise solutions at European Council summits. In domestic policy, the Chancellor emphasised the need to maintain EU solidarity in times of crisis.¹⁰

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From the perspective of French domestic policy, Macron was able to counter his opponents' accusations of excessive submissiveness towards Germany by arguing that his policy aimed at agreement with the eastern neighbour will bring much

⁶ P. Becker, "Changement de cap de l'Allemagne en matière de politique européenne : un repositionnement avec des limites," *Allemagne d'aujourd'hui*, vol. 236, 2021, p. 71.

⁷ S. Kinkartz, "Corona-Krise: Was haben die Deutschen gegen Eurobonds?" *Deutsche Welle*, 22 April 2020, www.dw.com.

⁸ L. Gibadto, "Coronapresidency: German Priorities for the Presidency of the Council of the EU," *PISM Bulletin* No 109/2020, 20 May 2020, www.pism.pl.

⁹ L. Gibadto, "Niemcy: schyłek ery Merkel w cieniu pandemii," *Rocznik Strategiczny*, 1/2020, p. 301.

¹⁰ B. Riegert, "Corona-Bonds - volle Fahrt voraus!," *Deutsche Welle*, 18 May 2020, www.dw.com.

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better results than the confrontation with it favoured by Greece, Italy, or Poland.

The Tandem's Eastern Policy until 24 February

France's and Germany's attitude towards Russia and Ukraine was not controversial between 2014 and 2022. Both countries used their participation in the Normandy Format, the aim of which was to negotiate and then implement the Minsk-1 and Minsk-2 agreements (which was not achieved), as an opportunity to demonstrate unity on the war in the Donbas. They supported the sanctions on Russia and, although not without resistance, the deployment of NATO battalion battlegroups in Poland and the Baltic States.¹¹ At the same time, both France and Germany opposed recognising Russia as an adversary after 2014.

In the case of Germany, the depth of economic ties played a key role, most notably the joint energy projects in the form of the Nord Stream gas pipelines (NS1, NS2), which were to play a key role in Germany's energy transition. The traditions of Germany's Eastern policy emphasising the importance of dialogue with Russia were not insignificant either. Chancellor Merkel's policy of prolonging EU sanctions while attempting diplomatic dialogue was characterised—in view of Putin's aggressive stance and events such as the series of hacking attacks on the Bundestag—by, among others, an increasing helplessness towards Russia.¹²

Most important for France was the strategic role of Russia as one of the “poles” of a changing world order. France, with its ambition to play a similar role, did not want to relinquish its right to dialogue with this country. An additional argument was the wide range of French investments in Russia and links in certain strategic economic sectors (oil and gas extraction, aeronautics, space industry, seeds).

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However, these reservations never turned into a real dispute, as the French authorities considered that their interests were not so threatened as to jeopardise relations with Germany over it. Moreover, the French gas importer Engie even joined the NS2 project with capital.¹³

Scholz-Macron: Cooperation after the French and German Elections in 2021-2022

The forming of a new coalition government in Germany after the Bundestag elections in the fall of 2021 was seen by commentators as an opportunity for closer stances by France and Germany on issues that had previously divided the two countries.¹⁴ Macron, in particular, hoped to advance discussions on deepening social integration, consolidating strategic industries or joint military projects, such as multi-role aircraft (FCAS) or next-generation tank (MGCS). The Franco-German tandem was also expected to promote treaty reform, with its flagship demand being the extension of qualified majority voting (instead of unanimity) in the EU Council on foreign and security policy issues. Although new Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasised from the very beginning the need for “European sovereignty”, referring to the concept of “strategic autonomy” promoted by French

¹¹ A. Kacprzyk, “Conventional Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank after the Warsaw Summit,” *PISM Bulletin*, nr 50/2016, 2 August 2016 r., www.pism.pl.

¹² S. Żerko, “Niemcy wobec Rosji—zarys historii niemieckiej Rossländpolitik,” *IZ Policy Papers*, 40/2022, pp. 54-55. For the fullest description of German policy mistakes towards Russia, see: T. Urban, “Verstellter Blick. Die deutsche Ostpolitik,” Berlin 2022.

¹³ “Nord Stream 2 AG and European Energy Companies Sign Financing Agreements,” *Engie*, 24 April 2017, www.engie.com.

¹⁴ Ł. Maślanka, “An Open Tandem: France and the New Coalition in Germany,” *PISM Bulletin* No 2/2022, 4 January 2022, www.pism.pl.

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diplomacy, it was the development of the German understanding of this concept during Scholz's speech in Prague¹⁵ on 29 August 2022 that raised concerns in France.¹⁶ While Macron's Sorbonne speech was addressed to Germany and included an offer of cooperation in deepening integration, particularly in the eurozone,¹⁷ France was barely mentioned in Scholz's Prague speech, and the main message was Germany's ambition to play the role of architect of compromises acceptable to all members of the Union and to combine deepening integration with EU enlargement.¹⁸

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The German understanding of "strategic sovereignty" differs from Macron's aim of an EU with "strategic autonomy". For the French president, the latter means being prepared for the scenario of a U.S. defence departure from Europe, the consolidation of the arms industry under the leadership of the most advanced Member States in this area, efforts to increase the EU's military capabilities, and involvement in the Mediterranean and Africa, among other actions. Scholz, on the other hand, and to a far greater extent than Macron, emphasises the role of NATO as the primary guarantor of Europeans' security.²⁰ French dissatisfaction came with Germany's decisions—confirming Scholz's words about NATO—to purchase 35 F-35 multi-role aircraft (instead of, for example, the French Rafale) and 60 CH-47 Chinook helicopters.²¹ The Germans justified the F-35 deal by wanting to participate in the nuclear-sharing programme, which the purchase of French aircraft (and the lack of French openness to Europeanisation of their deterrent force) could not provide. French journalists, experts, and politicians emphasise that the autonomy of EU countries in the field of defence can never be achieved if Europeans themselves do not buy armaments produced on the continent.

The most significant differences, though, are in the spheres of finance and migration policy. Germany has not embraced French proposals related to the coordination of fiscal and social policies, fearing, like in previous years, that this will open the way for money transfers to economically weaker countries. The French president advocated tighter migration policies and greater coordination of efforts at the EU level, which corresponded with French public opinion's fears of another migration crisis.²² Chancellor Scholz, on the other hand, given the German economy's labour shortage problems, advocates a greater opening of the EU to labour migrants.²³

After 24 February, the two leaders have unanimously emphasised that European sovereignty should also be linked to the diversification of raw material supplies and reducing dependence on Russia and China, as well as the green transformation and the development of new technologies. Preparing for

¹⁵ "Rede von Bundeskanzler Scholz an der Karls-Universität am 29. August 2022 in Prag," 29 August 2022, www.bundesregierung.de

¹⁶ N. Renaud, "Face à Moscou, Scholz veut ancrer le flanc Est de l'Europe," *Les Echos*, 29 August 2022, www.lesechos.fr.

¹⁷ Ł. Jurchyszyn, "President Macron's EU Reform Proposals: An Offer Addressed to Germany," *PISM Bulletin* No 101/2017, 26 October 2017, www.pism.pl

¹⁸ Ł. Jasiński, M. Szczepanik, "German Chancellor Takes Up the Future of Europe," *PISM Spotlight* No 114/2022, 31 August 2022, www.pism.pl.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ "Rede von Bundeskanzler...", *op. cit.*

²¹ "F-35: Nachfolger für den Tornado," www.bmvg.de.

²² "Sorbonne speech of Emmanuel Macron - Full text / English version," 26 September 2017, <http://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr>.

²³ "Rede von Bundeskanzler...", *op. cit.*

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the scenario of a cut-off of oil, gas, and rare-earth metals from Russia, the policy towards China also became the subject of dispute between the two countries in the fall of 2022.²⁴

The differences in the outlook on EU energy independence are burdened by conflicts from previous years, most notably Germany's opposition to further development of nuclear power, which accounts for about 70% of French electricity production. Although the French authorities could have replied

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with accusations that Germany was undermining EU energy security, Macron chose not to confront his partner for two reasons. The first is that France's nuclear power industry is in a state of decline due to a lack of investment in maintenance and construction of new reactors. As a result, France was forced to partially import electricity from Germany during the 2022/2023 winter season. And second, Macron fears that entering into open conflict with

Germany could jeopardise the EC's approval of French plans to build six new reactors. The two governments are therefore trying not to expose their differences on such key topics and are looking for room for cooperation. In the current winter season, it turned out to be a "gas-for-power" agreement: in exchange for exporting surplus German electricity to France, France pledged to re-sell some of its gas reserves to Germany. In public speeches, however, each of the leaders expose different priorities: Macron talks about the need for the EU economy to move away from fossil fuels as soon as possible and the role of nuclear power in the green transition, while Scholz emphasises the key role of renewable energy sources and seeks alternative gas suppliers for the floating LNG terminals currently under construction.²⁵

Another contentious point became the question of the MidCat gas pipeline, through which Germany wanted to source gas from Spain and Northern Africa. Macron opposed the construction of this pipeline through French territory, saying that short-term gas shortage problems should not be solved with investments that can only be profitable in the long term, as that delays the green transition and ties the EU's largest economy to fossil fuels.²⁶

France and Germany have similar positions on the future of relations with China. Both countries are discussing the possibility of reducing what they describe as "one-sided dependence" on China, but with the continuation of economic cooperation. For German companies in particular, their presence on the Chinese market has been a priority. In the first half of 2022, new German investment in China reached €10 billion, accounting for 7% of total German foreign investment.²⁷ Largely due to Germany's involvement, the EC completed negotiations on the Comprehensive Investment Agreement (CAI) with China in late December 2020.²⁸

Tensions rose over Chancellor Scholz's 4 November 2022 visit to Beijing. It took place in a peculiar political context—it was the first visit to China by a Western leader in three years and took place just days after the concentration of full power in the hands of Xi Jinping. Despite signals from President Macron, who sought a joint visit by French and German leaders to Beijing, Chancellor Scholz opted to travel alone, accompanied by the heads of German concerns. The visit was perceived in France as

²⁴ A. Dziubińska, "The Impossible Equilibrium: France Manoeuvres between Duelling China Policies," *PISM Bulletin* No 186/2022, 29 November 2022; Ł. Jasiński, "Cooperation and Peril: Germany Attempts a Policy Balance with China," *PISM Bulletin* No 184/2101, 25 November 2022, www.pism.pl.

²⁵ Ł. Jasiński, Z. Nowak, "Germany Works Towards Independence from Russian Raw Materials," *PISM Bulletin*, 190/2022, 2 December 2022, www.pism.pl

²⁶ "France to look into MidCat pipeline again as energy crunch tightens," *Politico*, 28 September 2022, www.politico.eu.

²⁷ J. Matthes, "China-Abhängigkeit der deutschen Wirtschaft: mit Volldampf in die falsche Richtung," *IW-Kurzbericht nr 68*, 19 August 2022, <https://www.iwkoeln.de>.

²⁸ M. Przychodniak, "Conclusion of Negotiations on the EU-China Comprehensive Investment Agreement," *PISM Spotlight* No 95/2020, 31 December 2020, www.pism.pl.

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a step that undermined Western unity, as well as evidence of German selfishness and putting economic interests above cooperation with European partners.²⁹

In late October-early November 2022, frustration at the lack of progress in resolving the differences of interest became particularly evident on the French side. It led the French authorities to cancel the Franco-German intergovernmental consultation scheduled for 26 October in Fontainebleau.

In late October-early November 2022, frustration at the lack of progress in resolving the differences of interest became particularly evident on the French side.

Although both sides explained it by the need to give each other more time to agree on contentious issues, the cancellation of the meeting was seen as a manifestation of the most serious crisis in bilateral relations seen in years. The French authorities sought to pressure Germany to negotiate concessions around the multi-role aircraft (FCAS) and maximum EU price for gas. Arrangements inside the German coalition government were judged to be so strenuous that

the German side subsequently showed little flexibility in the talks with the French. This tactic proved partially successful, as in late November Dassault and Airbus agreed on how to implement the FCAS project, including in particular the thorny issue of protecting the French company's patent rights.³⁰ Formed under the aegis of France and Italy, the coalition of a dozen countries forced Germany to accept the concept of a maximum price for gas (at €180 per MWh). According to the authorities in Berlin, a significantly lower price than the market maximum could potentially cause a boycott of European customers by LNG exporters.

State and Prospects for the Development of Franco-German Relations

The compromise around the post-pandemic recovery plan was expected to demonstrate the vitality of the Franco-German tandem, while the joint policy toward Russia and Ukraine before 24 February 2022 was to be a demonstration of the two countries' ability to give the EU direction in its external actions. Paradoxically, the effect of inflation caused by the joint debt has reinforced the reluctance of the German political class toward the idea and fears that Germany's subsidisation of weaker EU economies will be perpetuated. The crises were compounded by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which caused a further spike in inflation and an energy crisis. As a result, the long-standing differences between France and Germany were exposed and sharpened, even calling into question the wisdom of continuing such intensive cooperation between the two countries. The alarm still dominant in press reports about the end of the Franco-German tandem in the first half of November 2022, gave way in the following weeks to reflections on the lack of alternative to cooperation between the two countries in shaping the direction of further European integration.

External circumstances, such as protectionist U.S. policies, the strengthening of Eurosceptic forces within the EU, or the losses resulting from the lack of a common position on Russia and China, led Scholz and Macron to focus on a reconfiguration of cooperation rather than sharpening contentious issues. The summit meeting of the two leaders on 22 January 2023, held on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, along with a joint meeting of the Council of Ministers in Paris, provided an opportunity to emphasise the political will for further cooperation and compromise in certain spheres. France agreed to Germany's participation in the hydrogen corridor, which will also give Germany access to gas from African sources. The joint communiqué also marked both countries' support for Ukraine and for NATO, which can be read as a French gesture toward Germany. France and Germany are also expected to hold joint exercises of their troops on the Eastern Flank of NATO and the EU.

²⁹ M. Koch, "Der Alleingang des Kanzlers sorgt zu Recht für Verstimmung in Europa," *Deutschland Funk*, 5 November 2022, www.deutschlandfunk.de.

³⁰ "Accord conclu entre Dassault Aviation et Airbus sur l'avion de combat du futur," *Le Figaro*, 1 December 2022, www.lefigaro.fr.

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Both France and Germany have been finding it difficult to attract partners in the EU who could provide an alternative to the tandem. Although the French authorities are eager to assume the role of representative for the southern EU countries and consider the Euro-Mediterranean to be a priority area of French interests,³¹ at the same time they do not want France to be counted among the group of countries mired in an economic crisis and in need of constant assistance from the EU. For Germany, “thrifty” states in the northern part of the EU are natural partners, but the community of

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economic interests has not prevented a crisis of confidence in Germany, especially in Sweden, Denmark, and Finland, related to its error-prone policy towards Russia. Image losses were not prevented by the Chancellor’s August visit to the Scandinavian summit, nor by his strong support for the NATO aspirations of Finland and Sweden.³² Similar reasons, as well as conflicts with Poland, hinder Germany’s rapprochement with Central European

states, a scenario that France greatly feared after Scholz’s Prague speech.

In addition to the lack of serious alternatives, a factor driving Germany and France toward rapprochement is their shared opposition to the Biden administration’s protectionist policies, including in particular the solutions contained in the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), which could threaten the competitiveness of European industry in key areas of the energy transition (battery, chip production, electromobility). Both countries, in response to the IRA, are calling for greater support for European companies through, among other things, a system of subsidies and loosening of state aid rules.³³

For France, this serves as another opportunity to highlight the differences in interests between Europe and the U.S. and to convince Germany to build a “common strategic culture” in the EU. Equally notable is the common position of Germany and France towards Russia because it prompts the tandem to leave open the possibility of cooperating with the country after a peace or ceasefire with Ukraine. Statements by both Macron (on the need to give Russia “security guarantees” after the war³⁴) and Scholz (on the necessity of dialogue with Russia³⁵) indicate this common position. At the same time, both France and Germany understand the need to provide Ukraine with military and financial assistance capable of at a minimum containing the advance of Russian troops, but they do not want to be its initiators. Pressure from other allies, especially the U.S., to increase arms supplies is a significant factor. Assurances by Scholz and Macron of their willingness to return to dialogue with Russia have been accompanied in recent weeks by an intensification of the scope of military aid to Ukraine (including French AMX-10 armoured vehicles and German Marders and tanks).

None of these common elements remove the existing differences of interest between Germany and France, but will prompt their governments to continue cooperation for fear of weakening the political weight of both countries in the event of an escalation of the misunderstandings. The tandem will further define itself as a platform for agreeing foreign and economic policy visions for fear of common threats to both countries and the EU as a whole. This argument will be fostered by the lack of a realistic alternative in the EU to the leading role of the Franco-German partnership and the growing role of

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³¹“Politique méditerranéenne de la France,” *France Diplomatie*, November 2021, www.diplomatie.gouv.fr.

³² “Schweden und Finnland: Scholz erwartet bald Nato-Beitritt,” *Die Zeit*, 16 August 2022, www.zeit.de.

³³ “Joint statement by Bruno Le Maire and Robert Habeck: We call for a renewed impetus in European industrial policy,” *Ministère de l’Economie, des Finances et de la Souveraineté industrielle et numérique*, 22 November 2022, www.presse.economie.gouv.fr.

³⁴ A. Chemin, Ph. Ricard, “Guerre en Ukraine: le cavalier seul diplomatique d’Emmanuel Macron,” *Le Monde*, 12 December 2022, www.lemonde.fr.

³⁵ “Putin, beenden Sie diesen Krieg!, Süddeutsche Zeitung,” 16 December 2022, www.sueddeutsche.de.

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Eurosceptic forces in other Member States. It could lead to the formation—desired especially by France—of configurations of a two- or even multi-speed Europe, in which countries reluctant to share a common currency and deepen integration would find themselves (by their own choice) outside the new areas of enhanced cooperation (and thus without influence on them).

A less likely option is that the current cooperation between France and Germany would be sustained, with growing contentious issues and no new strategic initiatives, resulting in a weakening of the tandem's strength. In such a scenario, the network of economic, political, and social interconnections at various levels and the inability of France and Germany to enter into lasting alternative alliances will sustain the tandem's continued existence. Both President Macron and Chancellor Scholz will be keen to emphasise their states' closeness and pursue the joint projects in armaments, to name but one area.

The potential for more discord between France and Germany, in addition to the existing differences, is in possible changes in the political scene in both countries, particularly in the form of the rise of extreme forces contesting both European integration and the legitimacy of the continuation of the tandem. Such a risk exists in France where both Marine Le Pen in the presidential elections with her party National Rally and the extreme left in the parliamentary elections recorded historically high results. One of the demands of these parties (especially National Rally), is to reduce economic, political, and military cooperation with Germany, seen as weakening France, in favour of, among others, rapprochement with Russia.³⁶

In the case of Germany, there is also an upward trend in the polls for the AfD (13-15%, depending on the survey), making it the fourth political force in Germany. The party's programme calls for the

The least realistic scenario is a permanent breakup of the tandem.

dissolution of the EU and the creation of a looser economic community in its place. In the context of relations with France, the AfD rejects the idea of creating any European defence structures.³⁷ Given that the party has remained isolated by other groups at the federal and state levels for

years, even a further increase in its popularity will not mean it will gain influence over national politics. On the other hand, a real danger is a scenario in which the opposition CDU (leading in the polls) and the co-ruling FDP try to take over some of the AfD's voters and demands, for example, by blocking the idea of tightening European integration or pushing for German companies' interests, which will cause further tensions in relations with France.

A situation in which there would be a further weakening of the tandem while maintaining the appearance of unity would mean blocking EU reforms. At the level of the European Council, this would, in turn, result in an increase in the importance of medium-sized and smaller states, especially if France and Germany fail to agree on specific issues. An increased role for EU institutions, especially the presidents of the Council and the European Commission, can also be expected.

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The least realistic scenario is a permanent breakup of the tandem. The end of Franco-German cooperation is possible only with the accumulation of the above phenomena, meaning a spike in conflicting interests and the coming to power in one or both countries of extreme groups. The probability of the latter is higher in France than in Germany. The priority of a French government controlled by the far-right or far-left would certainly be to emphasise distance from Germany and intensify cooperation with all

³⁶ A. Dziubińska, "French Politics after the Second Round of Parliamentary Elections," *PISM Bulletin* No 102/2022, 22 June 2022; A. Dziubińska, "Le Pen's Vision of Foreign Policy," *PISM Bulletin* No 71/2022, 22 April 2022, www.pism.pl.

³⁷ "AfD. Grundsatzprogramm für Deutschland," AfD, April-May 2016, www.afd.de.

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partners interested in weakening it, including especially Southern European countries (in the case of a leftist victory) or countries ruled by Eurosceptic groups (in the case of a far-right victory). In response, Germany would seek to consolidate its traditional partnerships with Northern European countries, Austria, and the Netherlands, as well as selected Central European countries (e.g., Czechia, Croatia, Hungary Poland, or Slovakia, depending on the current political configuration). The break-up of the EU into competing blocs would probably lead to permanent crisis and entail negative economic phenomena, such as a significant weakening of the euro.

Implications for Poland

The most probable option—that the Franco-German cooperation will be maintained—means for Poland that the status quo is preserved. However, given the differences in the economic potentials of Poland, France, and Germany, discrepancies in the perception of the future of the European integration process, conflicts related to the rule of law, and bilateral disagreements between Poland and Germany, there is a hazard that the tandem will undertake initiatives unfavourable to Poland.

In European politics, this would mean a deepening of processes leading to Poland's exclusion from the mainstream of integration. In the context of the war in Ukraine, particularly undesirable would be attempts by the leaders of France and Germany to maintain a "dialogue" with the Putin regime and the conviction that the European security architecture should eventually include Russia. Contentious issues do not preclude Poland's cooperation with the tandem countries on selected issues, but they will be in a bilateral formula, as exemplified by the acceptance of the German offer to strengthen missile defence or the purchase of French reconnaissance satellites.

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The weakening of the Franco-German tandem could bring a temporary increase in Poland's role in the EU as a partner in alliances concluded by France or Germany on particular issues. To this end, it would be desirable to maintain balanced relations with both partners since Poland's interests in the issues at stake in the German-French dispute do not clearly lie on either side. The concept of balance, however, is also relative since relations with

Germany are of greater importance to Poland than relations with France: Germany is Poland's neighbour and Polish-German trade (€103.7 billion in 2021³⁸) is several times higher than Polish-French trade (€25.5 billion in 2021³⁹).

Together with France and a group of Central European countries, Poland advocates the development of nuclear energy, but dependence on coal and gas—as a transitional fuel for electricity generation—in the short to medium term brings Poland closer to Germany than to France, which produces the most decarbonised electricity in the EU. Poland's demonstrated ambitions to modernise and expand its armed forces may increase opportunities for cooperation with the EU's largest military power, France; however, Poland and Germany share a commitment to NATO and an alliance with the U.S. as well as a geographic location that makes security in Central Europe and a response to the Russian threat a much more pressing issue for both countries than for southern-focused France. Defining Polish interests in the face of Franco-German economic disputes is even more complicated. The existing system of solidarity among Member States based on cohesion fund resources is more advantageous for Poland than a "union of transfers" based on the eurozone, as advocated by France, among others. Germany's massive state aid to its businesses in connection with the energy crisis

³⁸ "Rangfolge der Handelspartner im Außenhandel der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (endgültige Ergebnisse)," *Destatis. Statistisches Bundesamt*, 3 November 2022, www.destatis.de.

³⁹ "Relations économiques entre la France et la Pologne," *Direction générale du Trésor*, 4 October 2022, www.tresor.economie.gouv.fr.

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poses much less of a threat to Poland as an economy partially complementary to Germany's than to the French or Italian economies, competing with German industry. Poland and Germany are also united in the belief that differences in economic interests between the EU and the U.S. should not lead to political conflict that could have dire consequences for Euro-Atlantic unity and European security.

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The least preferable scenario from Poland's point of view is a permanent conflict and breakup of the tandem, which would lead to a weakening of EU cohesion and, in its extreme form, paralysis of the community's decision-making processes. Regardless of the projected scenarios, Poland's relations with France and Germany will focus on the bilateral dimension. The Weimar Triangle format will

play only a marginal role as a forum for the exchange of views due to the difficulty of finding a common agenda linking all three countries.