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Research Report

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Consolidating the Weimar Triangle

European Policy Functions of German-Polish-French Co-operation

Kai-Olaf Lang and Daniela Schwarzer

Twenty years have passed since the launch of the Weimar Triangle. Yet apart from a number of glitzy summits, the German, Polish and French co-operation can hardly be considered as having played an influential role in European politics. Nonetheless, trilateral collaboration could certainly take on a number of useful functions in the EU, providing the community with urgently needed capacities such as leadership, consensus building or strategic guidance. In times of crises and turmoil it is certainly the pressing challenges of economic and financial policy where joint Weimar initiatives could be profitable for the EU. But the trio could also play its part in European security and defence policy, one of the few areas, where the Triangle is beginning to produce results, or neighbourhood and energy policy, where current strategies are in need of reassessment. If co-operation between Germany, France and Poland is to become more consistent, trilateral consultational structures will have to be strengthened.

Recent events have shown that the European Union needs both more coordination between its member states and stronger leadership. The debt crisis, the growing importance of national interests and political tensions between the member states have begun to destabilise the EU. Support for further integration is eroding all over the continent. At the same time the EU is facing severe challenges on its doorstep, including the dictatorship in Belarus and social upheaval in the Arab world. Without the commitment and close collaboration of its member states, the EU will neither generate political momentum for its own development nor play a significant role on the international stage.

In order to stabilise the integration process and to strengthen its political clout, the European Union needs additional footholds and linchpins. Among the structures which could be instrumental for this are small groups of member states as well as loosely structured frameworks for co-operation, in particular under the terms of the Lisbon Treaty which has significantly strengthened the European Council in its role as a steering and coordinating body.

The Weimar Triangle has the potential to become one of these influential groups in European politics. It consists of three key countries in the EU and two essential European bilateralisms: Franco-German and German-Polish relations. On 1 July 2011

Poland took over the presidency of the Council of Europe and now has the chance to prominently co-shape of European policy for some time. Moreover, Poland currently pursues a proactive approach to Europe and seeks close ties to Germany and France. Similarly, the German government has committed itself to strengthening German-Polish relations and to upgrade the Weimar Triangle. Paris, however, would need to be encouraged if trilateral co-operation were to be strengthened.

Missed opportunities before Poland's accession

In the past, the Weimar Triangle has had far too many expectations attached to it. It was founded in August 1991, during the first trilateral meeting between the German, French and Polish foreign ministers in Weimar. In the context of a complicated European environment, their aim was to emphasise the shared values between the three countries. Together they hoped their efforts would consolidate democracy, wealth and security on the continent.

As a result civil and cultural exchange between the three countries developed continuously. But in terms of European policy, this co-operation fell far from meeting its stated objectives. The Weimar Triangle was not even able to play a key role in achieving its central objective of the 1990s: Poland's EU accession. In the end what really paved the way for Poland's EU entry in 2004 were 'hard' German interests, Warsaw's continued efforts as well as the general and eventually irreversible progress of eastern enlargement.

After 2004, the three countries missed their chance to become the 'new engine' of an enlarged EU an option some "Weimar triangle optimists" had ascribed to the group, after Franco-German cooperation had lost weight and harmony in the bigger Union. At the Wroclaw summit in May 2003, just a year ahead of the Eastern enlargement of the EU, top level representatives of the three countries agreed on an

ambitious agenda to strengthen trilateral co-operation. In a joint declaration they praised the Triangle as a "forum for dialogue and co-operation" which was worth developing into a "force capable of providing an enlarged Union with new impetus".

The lacking relaunch after 2004

This could have provided a basis for the trio to demonstrate its usefulness as a mediator in conflict resolution, as shortly before Poland's accession to the EU strong disagreements arose between the three countries. Yet the Weimar Triangle did not take up opportunities such as engaging in the discussion on the Iraq War or 'double majority' debate (in the course of which Poland opposed a reform of the voting weights in the Council which it thought were disproportionately beneficial to Germany and France). Furthermore, the triangle played no role in the long and difficult negotiations on the reforms of cohesion policy or the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) after Poland's accession.

There are various reasons why the declaration of 2003 was to bear no fruit. The main responsibility lies with the three governments themselves. Paris was fundamentally sceptical to eastern enlargement and showed no genuine interest in closely co-operating with Poland, the largest Central European accession country. In Berlin, ambitious plans were spelled out which were never to materialise. In Poland, which is traditionally the most "pro-Weimarian" of the three countries, sometimes the domestic political situation made a strong European engagement difficult. Especially during the government and presidency of the EU-sceptic Kaczyński twins and their party between 2005 and 2007, the Triangle passed through a phase of perplexity.

Bilateral relations were also to act as a brake during the first years after the EU's eastern expansion. Although intense, German-Polish relations were repeatedly faced with difficulties such as differing approaches towards Russia or squabbles

about historic questions. The German and French heads of state switched between exclusive claims to leadership and mutual distrust. Franco-Polish relations remained reserved and lacked substance as well as mutual understanding, whether in transatlantic relations or relations between the EU and NATO. In France, meetings of the Weimar Triangle failed to increase interest in Eastern Europe. At the same time, Polish fears of Franco-German dominance also remained, as is clear from the discussions regarding the EU's institutional changes and the related reform of voting rights.

Favourable domestic conditions

After many years in which the Weimar Triangle only played a minor role, there are currently several factors which could help it gain momentum. Firstly, domestic conditions are rather favourable. Re-elected Prime Minister Donald Tusk has based Poland's European policy ambitions on co-operation with Berlin and Paris. Since 2010 this approach has been supported by Bronisław Komorowski, the then elected Polish president, who has declared revitalising the Weimar triangle to be one of his foremost political goals.

In particular since the change of government in 2009, Germany has emphasised its intention to intensify German-Polish co-operation and to place it on a similar level as its relations with France. At a meeting on 21 June 2011 in Warsaw, the German and Polish governments drew up an ambitious programme for bilateral co-operation, including the idea of a German-Polish partnership for Europe. Co-operation in the context of the Triangle is also to be intensified.

In the short-term at least, the conditions in France for a re-launch of trilateral co-operation are relatively good. Visible successes achieved through European co-operation would benefit Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, ahead of the presidential elections in April and May 2012 and the parliamentary elections in June 2012. France's foreign policy is currently focussed

on its G20 presidency, and with the exceptions of policy in North Africa and the debt crisis in the Euro area, other issues of EU integration are playing a subordinate role. The management of the Euro crisis and the efforts to strengthen Europe's competitiveness are key issues in which Paris, Berlin and Warsaw could present themselves as a force for reform and consolidation. This should be in Sarkozy's interest as he has to cope with rising market pressure on French government bonds.

Yet there is only a limited period of time available. Given the upcoming elections, Sarkozy will be focussing on his electoral campaign from the end of 2011 onwards. His European policy is then likely to become more erratic, particularly due to the popularity of the EU-sceptic right-wing candidate, Marine Le Pen. For this upcoming period and the time after the elections it would be useful if the Weimar Triangle would stick to a pre-defined agenda.

Despite the favourable domestic settings at least in Germany and Poland, it cannot be taken for granted that the Weimar Triangle is gaining momentum. Recently, high-level meetings between the three countries have certainly become more frequent. Gatherings of foreign ministers and state secretaries in charge of European affairs have brought new motion in the field of foreign and security policy, such as the involvement of eastern partners like Ukraine and Russia. Furthermore initiatives have been undertaken to strengthen Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP). An example of this was the letter signed by six foreign and defence ministers to the High Representative Catherine Ashton in December 2010 and the underlying Weimar initiative aiming inter alia at the creation of civil-military planning and conduct capabilities with permanent character. Parts of the proposals were incorporated in a report of the High Representative from July 2011.

But on core questions of European policy, for instance the EU's medium term financial framework, both Paris and Berlin have recently shown little interest in the

Weimar Triangle. France and Germany, as well as the United Kingdom and other like-minded countries, all tried to define red lines before the European summit in October 2010. Another example is the Franco-German paper on the future of CAP drafted in autumn 2010 without Polish involvement. In addition, the 'Pact for Competitiveness', also proposed by Berlin and Paris, was initially supposed to improve economic policy coordination among Euro zone member only, before it was later turned into the "Euro Plus Pact".

Harsh reactions from Warsaw demonstrated that the Polish government disapproves of Franco-German initiatives in which they are not involved. Despite announcements to the contrary, the close coordination between Berlin and Paris has only rarely been opened up to Poland. The fact that Germany had signalled its openness towards the participation of non-Euro states in the Pact for Competitiveness from the start, and that it invited Poland to take part in the new coordinating body at the Weimar summit in February 2011 changed little of Warsaw's critical view on Franco-German co-operation. Similarly, recent Franco-German ideas on tighten Euro zone governance presented by the French President and the German Chancellor in August 2011 were tabled without even informing the Polish Council Presidency early. At the start of Poland's EU Presidency, France had been among the member states which blocked the participation of Poland's finance minister Rostowski (in his capacity as ECOFIN-chair) in the meetings of the Eurogroup to which Eurogroup President Jean-Claude Juncker had invited him. A Polish response was to gather Non-EMU-members from Central and South Eastern Europe which called for more coherence in economic governance in Europe.

Possible tasks in European policy

There is hence a tendency in France and Germany to disregard the Weimar Triangle's political potential. Yet if the tri-

angle is to be of practical use to the EU, it will have to develop from a consultative body towards a real framework for co-operation. If this were to take place, the Weimar Triangle could go on to take over four central functions.

Clearinghouse: Trilateral co-operation would mainly contribute to developing compromises, so aiding decision preparation and conflict resolution.

Providing impetus: The three countries together would specifically place issues on the EU's political agenda.

Political guidance: The EU is finding it increasingly difficult to develop long-term strategies in many policy areas. The Weimar Triangle could help improve the EU's capacity for strategic coordination and guidance in selected areas. Guidance does not mean dominance and control, but shaping of direction that draws its legitimacy from the involvement of other partners.

Weimar as a Brace: At the current stage of integration, and with the new risks of divisions, the Weimar Triangle could strengthen internal cohesion between the old 'western' and the young 'eastern' EU member states. It could also bring together regional networks and form links between the partnerships which each of the triangle members already belong to.

Limitations and key conditions for success

When discussing these functions the limitations of the trilateral co-operation also have to be taken into account. One such limiting factor is the fact that the Weimar Triangle, just like the Franco-German co-operation, is an alliance of "heavyweights". If the Triangle wants to shape European politics, its agreements require acceptance by smaller EU states. Hence it is essential that the triangle be linked to other groups of countries such as the Visegrád group (with Poland as the respective hub), the Mediterranean countries (France), the Benelux partners (Germany) or the Baltic Sea region (Germany)

and Poland). The Triangle could also invite EU partner countries (in defence policy such as the United Kingdom) or representatives of the Union (such as the High Representative) to its meetings.

The fact that the United Kingdom is not part of the Triangle does not necessarily cause problems in all areas. Yet there are several policy areas where the three countries would hardly be able to strengthen European politics without London's co-operation. Despite the progress in matters related to CSDP it will probably be vital to link the United Kingdom's political power and military capabilities to the Weimar initiatives. British resistance against the creation of a permanent operational headquarters has shown that progress in CSDP against Great Britain is hardly possible. The defence agreements between Britain and France could take on a bridge function here.

Furthermore there is a certain risk that the three Weimar countries could either neutralise each other in decision-making processes, or that their agreements would be based on the lowest common denominator. If fundamental positions are too distant from one another and a shared understanding for initiatives is lacking, it is unlikely that the Triangle would provide impetus. This would turn it into a forum where the members carefully watch over each other and slow each other down. From a German point of view the question therefore remains whether separate bilateral relations focused on particular policies with Poland on the one hand (concerning questions of partnerships with eastern countries for instance) and with France on the other (based around certain economic and financial issues for example) would provide better results than those produced through the potentially cumbersome structure of the Weimar Triangle. It is worth remembering that there are far more complexities involved in managing trilateral arrangements than nurturing the tried and tested Franco-German and Polish-German relations. Without a realistic assessment of these problems

“more Weimar” would just mean more coordination – with little political results.

For all efforts to strengthen the Triangle, it is indispensable to tackle the question how French engagement can be secured. As the successful CSDP initiative has shown, French interest can be aroused best when Germany and Poland use the Triangle to focus on European policies which are viewed as particularly important in Paris.

Guidelines for co-operation

Given all these restrictions and open questions, it is necessary to set out how exactly the Weimar Triangle can take on a useful role in specific policies and issues areas of European politics. In doing so it is important to acknowledge the fact that even if the Weimar Triangle were to become more dynamic politically, it would still not be a territorially defined regional grouping. Instead the triangle should embody a proactive and open minilateralism which is dedicated to improving the EU.

Co-operation among the three countries can take place on two levels. There are firstly low-politics orientated towards civil society and culture; and secondly high-politics or the “hard dimension” of European affairs, strategic questions and foreign policy. These levels are interrelated and may reinforce each other. But if the three countries want to sketch out an ambitious European agenda, they have to focus on high-politics which should be treated separately from “soft” co-operation.

There is also some vagueness as to how the Weimar Triangle relates to the three distinct bilateral relations. Even if the Triangle rises in importance, it will not completely replace bilateral partnerships. Moreover, its new foreign dimensions (such as relations with Russia or Ukraine in the framework of the “Weimar Triangle Plus meetings”) have to be distinguished from other forms of co-operation in which one or more of the three countries are involved. This includes co-operation between Germany, Poland and Russia and the occa-

sional meetings between Germany, France and Russia. In other words, policy makers will have to choose the appropriate forum to handle specific challenges – is it “Weimar”, is it bilateral relations or is it groups of member states and partners? The Weimar group will also have to define a set of policy areas on which to focus. There are four main themes of particular relevance.

Foreign and Eastern Policies

With regard to EU external relations, Berlin, Paris and Warsaw could particularly inspire European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), where they could balance the Eastern and Mediterranean dimension. Poland and Germany play leading roles in the co-operation with eastern neighbour states, and both are also key players in relations with Russia. Meanwhile, France is mostly active in the southern Mediterranean, where Germany also retains substantial interests. For this reason, the Weimar Triangle has a good chance of leading a stable consensus on ENP and to reduce competition between Eastern and Southern member states. The meetings of the Weimar Triangle’s foreign ministers with external partners, as in 2010 with the Russian and Ukrainian foreign ministers or in 2011 with Moldova’s head of diplomacy, could also be extended to other countries, for example from the Southern neighbourhood. This would be a chance for France to take the initiative within the Weimar framework. This approach could also be strengthened at the top level, for instance by inviting the Russian head of state to a Weimar Triangle summit (as proposed by Komorowski, the Polish president).

At the same time the Triangle’s foreign policy dimension would have to be developed at the practical level: a trilateral working group from the three foreign ministries working on eastern and neighbourhood policy could develop concrete project ideas for the EU’s Partnership for Modernisation with Russia as well as for the Eastern Partnership. The combined authori-

ty of France, Germany and Poland, joint declarations and especially trips by the foreign ministers could help encourage reform in EU neighbouring countries.

“Democratic neighbourhoods” of the EU is an issue of interest to all three countries, even if individually they have focussed on different geographical regions. The problematic developments in Belarus and Ukraine could become a focus just as much as could the processes in Tunisia or post-Gaddafi Libya. Weimar efforts could include a better political coordination in dealing with states in transformation or a reinforced transfer of democratisation expertise, particularly with the help of Poland. A trilateral ‘Weimar Foundation for Democracy’ could integrate experiences from civil society and policies of reform in the three countries. Alternatively, the three countries could think about common projects in the framework of the “European Foundation for Democracy”, a recent initiative launched by Poland.

If a ‘Weimar Fund’ was established to support trilateral initiatives in particular from science and civil society, it could organise visiting and residency programmes for representatives of new democratic elites in countries neighbouring the EU. The fund could also develop ‘Weimar Fellowship Programmes’ for scientists, students and qualified individuals from the private sector and government administrations, offering work or training stays in all three countries.

Security Policy

European security and defence policy is one of the few areas where the Weimar Triangle has actually led to progress. This has been possible despite the three countries’ traditionally different security approaches: Poland has been Atlanticist; the French attitude has been predominantly European; and Germany has emphasised both transatlantic and European components.

Trilateral co-operation in the field of CSDP buttresses the Europeanisation

of Poland's security policy and binds France more strongly to Germany and Poland (notwithstanding the recently relaunched bilateral Franco-British co-operation). At the same time it offers the possibility for a growing convergence between the three countries in the sense of a European-Atlantic security consensus. Recent examples for Weimar's new security and defence co-operation include the idea of drawing up a Weimar Triangle Battle Group (i.e. forming a European combat unit), the letter by foreign and defence ministers to the High Representative mentioned above and joint proposals to strengthen planning and command structures in EU military interventions.

Meanwhile, trilateral discussions on security issues should not be confined to the CSDP framework. In the past, conflicts have arisen between Paris and Berlin on one side and Warsaw on the other. This occurred for instance due to differing views on transatlantic relations, the post-soviet area and the role of Russia. A regular "security dialogue" between high ranking representatives of government headquarters (including security advisors), foreign and defence ministries, possibly supported by a broader forum including other branches of government, as well as members of parliaments and experts, could enhance the strategic exchange between the three partners.

Economic policy

As far as economic issues concerned, the Weimar Triangle has not been significant. As long as Poland remains outside the Euro zone, it will hardly be possible to transform the trio into a key policy shaper. However, the Weimar Triangle could bridge the gap between Euro zone members and non-members. As a member-country 'in line' for EMU membership, Poland acts differently from the United Kingdom, which is a permanent Euro-by-stander. The Weimar group could help bind candidate countries more closely to the process of deepening the Euro zone.

From a German point of view there is another reason why Poland is an important partner: Warsaw governments are following a philosophy of public spending and state budgets, which is oriented towards financial stability. Mechanisms such as a constitutional debt ceiling show that the Polish mainstream budget idea is quite close to that of Germany's. Moreover, the Polish economy has recovered more dynamically from the economic crises than many other European countries. Strengthening the EU's internal market and finding new areas for economic growth are key issues during the Polish presidency of the Council of the EU. The Weimar group could play an important role in ensuring these questions are concluded successfully.

In order for this to occur, the intensive co-operation between Germany and France in the management of the Euro crisis would have to be matched with regulatory strategies which Berlin and Warsaw can agree on. If France were to coordinate economic and financial policy with Poland, an important partner from outside the Euro zone, then Franco-German policies could gain further legitimacy. This could raise French interest in the Weimar Triangle. Germany's government could act as a mediator, and in many issues Berlin would be able to count on the co-operation of both sides. A first step towards would be to organise regular trilateral meetings of the ministers for economy and finance.

European energy policy

In French, German and Polish energy policy there are numerous possibilities for both co-operation and conflict. In part, Germany's decision to close its nuclear power plants has made these differences more relevant. Unlike Germany, France and Poland plan to expand their nuclear programs and co-operation in the field of nuclear energy. At the same time Germany and Poland are investing in the study of 'clean' coal technologies, as both countries have a large coal industry and are affected

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by European climate policy. Meanwhile, projects such as the Nord Stream gas pipeline have been highly controversial, showing the salience and sensitivity of energy related issues between the two Weimar countries. All in all, the three countries' interests diverge so strongly due to their specific composition of energy mixes, differing approaches to the relationship with Russia and due to the particular levels of dependency in their energy industries.

An energy summit organised by the Weimar Triangle, and attended by the ministers for the economy and the environment, could help allay differences, but also produce practical ideas for specific projects. A joint energy efficiency initiative ideally involving further partners could bring together companies, public administrations, municipalities and research institutions. Its objective would be to develop innovative ways of saving energy, and developing sustainability and climate protection primarily at the local level.

Strengthening the co-operation

In order to implement these initiatives, stringent and strong management as well as sufficient resources are required. This does not imply the creation of many new structures. Yet a small number of new guiding and coordinating bodies would certainly make sense. As a means of raising the organisation's level of efficiency it would be important to ensure the institutions through which the three partners co-operate are sufficiently networked and are provided with adequate funds. The position of a Weimar coordinator could be established in the three partners' foreign ministries, tightly linked to the European policy decision centre. In order to ensure in-depth co-operation between the Weimar partners, it would be important to involve the working level of all line ministries tasked with implementing trilateral priorities.

If the Triangle is to take on a stronger conceptual role in Europe, then the national coordination centres for European affairs

should cooperate more closely. This could include consultations between the heads of European policy departments in both government headquarters and foreign ministries. In general, these fora need a clear agenda with common priorities, and plans on their implementation. The results could be assessed during trilateral summits or meetings of "ministers" in charge of European integration. Such measures would increase continuity in co-operation and occupy the periods between summits.

The parliamentary dimension would also have to be given a more prominent role – particularly now that the Lisbon Treaty has made national parliaments increasingly relevant players in European politics. Meetings of the three parliamentary presidiums and the EU committees should be complemented by meetings of other committees. A French-German-Polish interparliamentary group would be an additional link between the legislative bodies of the three countries.

Leaving empty phrases behind

Until now the Weimar Triangle has existed more as an option than as a real framework for action. If the three countries fail to use the opportunities arising now, they should draw the conclusions and give up the idea of enhancing the Triangle's role in the EU.

In this case, an intensification of co-operation should be avoided to prevent resources from being wasted. If the idea of an important role for the Weimar Triangle in European policy-making is abandoned, then it should limit its activities to civil society and cultural initiatives.

European initiatives and harmonisation between the three countries could still be developed, but mainly bilaterally, that is in Franco-German or Polish-German partnerships. The price of this option is that bilateral initiatives have less mobilising power, less legitimacy and the three countries would contribute significantly less to the strengthening of the EU.