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Au revoir, my friends!

Macron is no longer automatically siding with Germany in European politics – and with good reason

Read this article in German or Russian.

A recent article in the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* suggested that President Emmanuel Macron was imposing his will on the rest of the EU again. This is typical of the line taken by many in the German media. Before the European elections, Macron was criticised for using the same tactic that won him the 2017 French presidential election: invoking the divide between 'friends and enemies of democracy'.

Shortly after the European elections, during negotiations on the top jobs, the focus of criticism shifted. Now, Macron was said to have joined forces with Orbán in order to push through the German candidate Ursula von der Leyen and scupper the *Spitzenkandidaten* process held so dear by Germany and European democracy. Indeed, the unsuccessful candidate Manfred Weber condemned this in *Bild-Zeitung* as an 'axis' in a thinly-veiled reference to the 'axis of evil'. But back in September 2018, alarm bells started ringing for Germany when Macron positioned himself clearly and firmly against Orbán. Accordingly, in less than a year, Macron had miraculously transformed Franco-Hungarian relations from a fundamental split to a supposed 'axis'.

Moreover, Macron was said to have pushed through a close ally as president of the ECB in Christine Lagarde – rather than Jens Weidmann, as some German economists would have liked. The final French gambit – or so the story goes – came at the beginning of August 2019: Bulgaria's candidate Kristalina Georgieva failed to gain the nomination as chair of the IMF. Instead, France prevailed again with a 'brutal act of violence' that saw French interests uncompromisingly asserted over German ones.

A wrong narrative

Unfortunately, this narrative ignores the political backstory and also

betrays a lack of knowledge of French European policy. Rather than being a miraculous turnaround, Macron's search for alliances in Europe, some of whom are also opposed to German interests, is rooted in political logic. Instead of aiming a tide of resentment at the French, Germany should take a critical look at its own role in European politics.

In the last two years – since Macron's Sorbonne speech and the German federal election in September 2017 – Germany has not cut a particularly impressive figure in European politics. Macron's speech was received half-heartedly, initially due to the ongoing coalition negotiations. The German federal government simply ignored most of France's proposals. The Meseberg Declaration of June 2018 was met with a muted response. Adopted work packages such as unemployment reinsurance were then swept under the carpet by Merkel's Christian Democrats (CDU). Their coalition partner, the Social Democratic Party (SPD), came up with no European policy visions or ambition, either.

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Instead, there's one word in particular that one could hear from Germany: no. No to the 2050 climate targets, to France's proposal of a digital tax, to eurozone reforms, to a eurozone parliament, to unemployment reinsurance, to a joint AI strategy. Germany, the strongest country in Europe, both economically and demographically, has become a stagnant force, just when the EU faces genuinely historic internal and external challenges more than ever before. This is problematic in two respects: for the EU because a strong country like Germany is needed for progressive politics. And because this kind of attitude stokes anti-German sentiment in countries that Germany needs as partners. In particular, this German position goes a long way to explaining Macron's new manoeuvres in European politics.

Macron has understood that little can be expected from the current German federal government. Following the clear failure of his efforts to shape European policy with Germany, he is now trying a different tack. He has consistently emphasised the importance of getting other partners on board as well as pursuing Franco-German initiatives. In doubt, Macron is now doing this 'against' Germany too.

Macron knows how European politics work

There's only one way to get anywhere in Europe: on the European Council, reaching a compromise involves building alliances and negotiating. This means that Macron has understood how the EU works, not that he has suddenly embraced Orbán. Opposing Poland, Hungary and Italy on the European Council is tough – as Frans Timmermans found as a candidate for the Commission presidency and Jeroen Dijsselbloem as an IMF candidate. In addition, the Eastern European states have not landed any top jobs.

Furthermore, there are other good reasons for France to support Bulgaria's Kristalina Georgieva as an IMF candidate: she is popular in developing countries, which would strengthen the requisite majorities for a European candidate. And finally, Macron did not want to support a Dutch candidate – neither Timmermans nor Dijsselbloem – as the Netherlands have clearly positioned themselves against Macron's proposal for a European Investment Stabilisation Function. Yes, national interest matters in the EU. Just as Germany regularly asserts its interests, so too does Macron.

The angry responses to Macron's new leading role in European politics say more about Germany's double standards than about France. Germany in particular has managed to carve out a hegemonic role for itself in Europe and has constantly asserted its national interests. For example, the EU digital tax was not pursued by Germany because Berlin feared a US retaliation in the form of tariffs on German cars. But when other countries assert themselves as France is doing now, they are instantly criticised. Why should it be an act of violence when France pushes for its own IMF candidate but entirely fair when Germany does the same? Germany's current position betrays a certain arrogance. There's a belief that partners can be ignored to subsequently just assume that they won't go their own way. Europe doesn't work like that.

France's manoeuvres in European politics, particularly apparent in the recent Council staffing decisions, can therefore be regarded as the consequence of a lack of response from Germany. Germany's non-answer has led to a Franco-German *mésentente*. That is bad for Europe. In a fragile political context, it's especially important to have a strong Franco-German partnership. This situation should be a wake-up call for the German federal government. It's now up to Germany to devise proposals, make overtures towards France and restore lost trust – in order to show that Germany can be relied on in European politics. Until then, France can be expected to remain active in European politics even without its

German partner.



Sophie Pornschlegel
Brussels

Sophie Pornschlegel is a senior policy analyst at the European Policy Center in Brussels, where she heads the *Connecting Europe* project. Her focus is on European politics, Franco-German relations and questions on the future of European democracy.