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Dusting off the 'Weimar Triangle'

Resurrecting the 30-year alliance between Germany, France, and Poland could build bridges in the EU — with climate action and civic exchange

The European Union is currently pulled apart by a few informal alliances, each driven by very different, sometimes contradictory, ideas. For instance, there are the bargain hunters of the 'Frugal Four', the Nordic-Habsburg alliance of Austria, Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden that accuses the EU's 'Stability and Growth Pact' of being the start of a 'debt union'.

Then, there are the Central European 'Visegrád Four' who aspire to an ethno-nationalist and Christian-occidental EU and happily help themselves to funds from Brussels while stonewalling against migrants, particularly Muslims.

Finally, there is the debt-strapped 'Club Med' of the countries who bear the burden of all trans-Mediterranean migration – and feel discriminated against and abandoned. What all these centrifugal forces in the Hague, Rome, Budapest and Warsaw have in common is a critical stance towards the supposed superiority of Germany and France.

Falling apart not together

Probably only known to geeks, the 'Weimar Triangle' is a far cry from the three clubs mentioned above. When the foreign ministers of France, Germany, and Poland founded their alliance 30 years ago in the East German city of Weimar, they pinned great hopes on it: *three* pillars would guarantee a more solid foundation for a united Europe than the simple Franco-German axis.

For a few decades, high-level meetings did in fact use the format to develop joint domestic and foreign policies for the EU until Polish Prime Minister Lech Kaczynski demanded concrete results – but couldn't see any. His position was certainly over-the-top, a show of antipathy towards everything originating in Berlin and a friendly gesture to right-wing

governments in Poland. After that, Kaczynski and the Fidesz regime of Hungary's Viktor Orbán took leave of liberal values and the Weimar Triangle lost influence.

Three pillars would guarantee a more solid foundation for a united Europe than the simple Franco-German axis.

Over time, Genshagen Castle in Brandenburg came to symbolise the Weimar Triangle: a venue for people of good will to develop new ideas for the prematurely aging alliance – but with negligible results. Warsaw now views democracy and European integration in a very different light than in Paris and Berlin. Moreover, Germany and France are *also* growing apart rather than translating their long amity into tangible projects on environmental and climate policy, migration, and European security.

More than ever, it is these three policy areas that are shaping the European agenda. Climate change is accelerating, which makes the phasing-out of coal more urgent. A coordinated environmental, climate, and sustainability policy for the EU is also gaining geopolitical significance. Since 2015, the issue of migration has driven a deep wedge into the union.

But even greater challenges lie ahead – especially in connection with the climate crisis. These cannot be met with nationalist isolation. The debacle in Afghanistan also shows that Europe has no security concept. This lack will become even more obvious when the United States under President Joe Biden pulls out of Europe. Yet at the recent meeting of EU defence ministers, there was no hint they are planning any military cooperation.

A necessary reinvention

The Weimar Triangle countries treat these three policy agendas as cherished matters of national security. These, however, cannot be effectively addressed by each of the 27 EU member states acting on their own. Especially in Poland, there are massive violations of the rule of law that are unacceptable to Paris, Berlin, and Brussels. Although the rhetoric of the Weimar Triangle sounds hollow these days, its format should be reconsidered and renewed. The EU's climate policy could, paradoxically, accomplish this by means of an inclusive 'technical' roadmap to overcome ideological differences.

Rather than more summit meetings of lethargic governments, what's needed now is civic cooperation.

While the sentimentality of the early Weimar Triangle has faded, a 'Weimar plus' that braces its fragments is promising – with France contributing aspects of South-South cooperation beyond the Mediterranean, Germany building a bridge to the Nordic and Baltic states, and Poland promoting cooperation with Europe's backwater, the Balkans. The best method to draw the countries together again would be a common energy and climate policy that builds on strengths and compensates for weaknesses.

Rather than more summit meetings of lethargic governments, what's needed now is *civic* cooperation. This is the democratic innovation of 'Weimar 2.0'. Both Germany and France are already experimenting with citizens' councils – advisory bodies created to support representative democracy by seriously debating crucial issues and building consensus across political camps.

France has already hosted a climate convention and Germans have been thinking about their country's role in the world. The idea of consultative democracy is finding more and more acceptance. As for Poland, its civil society has plenty of parallels. So let's set the date: Weimar 2022 – for a trilateral citizens' council.



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