

Macron and Merkel's warm words mask deeper Franco-German divisions over the future of Europe

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One of Emmanuel Macron's first acts as French President was to meet German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Julian Göppfarth writes that Macron's victory over Marine Le Pen was welcomed by both of Germany's mainstream parties, albeit in different ways. But behind the warm words, his ambitious proposals for the Eurozone are bound to generate concerns among German politicians and both sides will have to compromise if their renewed Franco-German cooperation is to be successful.



On 15 May, Emmanuel Macron made his first official visit to meet Angela Merkel. Regardless of who will be German chancellor in September, the meeting possibly marked a starting point for renewed Franco-German cooperation in the EU. Macron is the fourth French President Merkel has had to work with, but under Macron's predecessors Europe's so called "twin-engine", a well-balanced and strong Franco-German leadership in the EU, started to stutter.

At the same time, the elections in both countries have rarely been as closely linked as they have been this year. This is not only because French and German elections are being held in the same year, but also because the content of each election campaign has been influenced strongly by developments in the other country. The effect has been to underline how important it is to reach a common answer to the many crises Europe is facing.

In France, a negative image of Germany and especially Angela Merkel was omnipresent in the Front National's (FN) campaign. Besides Islam, the EU and globalisation, the FN portrayed Merkel and Germany as the biggest threats to French sovereignty. In her last televised debate with Emmanuel Macron before the election, Marine Le Pen boasted that "no matter the outcome of the election, France would be governed by a woman: either me or Madame Merkel".

This unease with Germany's increasing political power in the EU is hardly constrained to the radical right party and its supporters. It is equally felt by part of the Gaullist conservative establishment. One of the most prominent figures to express this was Marie-France Garaud, former adviser of President Georges Pompidou. In an [interview with Le Figaro](#) she claimed that what would be at stake in the election would be nothing less than French sovereignty. Under Macron, France would become little more than a province of a fourth Reich.

This fear is also present among the far left and has previously been cited by Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the presidential candidate for *La France insoumise*, who came fourth in the first round of the election. In a book published in 2015, he described Germany as the source of "misery and social and political chaos", a "monster" created by deregulated finance. Mélenchon accuses Germany of becoming a "danger *again*" by imposing a model that will ultimately undermine French civilisation. During the election campaign, he refrained from openly stating such ideas, but repeatedly warned of a "German hegemony".

While such implicit Nazi comparisons remain rare, this unease is relatively widespread. It is a feeling that is not only related to Germany's current weight in the EU and especially the Eurozone, but also the recurrent attempts by French Presidents to emulate "*le modèle Allemand*", specifically the so-called "Agenda 2010" labour market reforms introduced by former German chancellor Gerhard Schröder in 2005.

In France, the reforms stand largely for precarious employment and an undermining of the "*acquis sociaux*", the "national achievements" of social rights introduced during France's post-war growth period. Including such regulations as the 35-hour-week and retirement at 60, these social rights have increasingly come to symbolise nothing less than a French way of life which is now increasingly threatened by a dominant Germany. Under Merkel, the term 'austerity politics' has come to represent this threat.

Macron, on the other hand, is known to be a 'Germanophile', even if during the campaign he avoided references to Germany and focused on France and his plans for a "Europe that protects". He made his commitment to strong Franco-German relations clear by visiting Germany twice during the campaign. In a [speech given to university students](#) during his first visit, he conceded that he could easily be cheered in France if he claimed Germany was the country's main adversary. However, he stated that both countries share the same challenges in a globalising world and, therefore, their cooperation in and for Europe is more important than ever before.

As a consequence, Germany's reaction to Macron's victory has been largely positive among both of the country's two major parties, the SPD and CDU. Both parties were relieved that Macron beat Le Pen. But now that Macron has officially become the new French President, things are getting more complicated. While both are trying to benefit from the positive, pro-European signal Macron's victory sent throughout Europe for their own election campaigns, the way they do so differs. On the one hand, Merkel has indicated her confidence in Macron's ability to reform France, which, in her eyes, will make Europe stronger. On the other hand, the SPD's leader, former President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, has called for a common effort to establish a new, more social Europe with a common budget. Both approaches reflect two very different pro-European visions.

This became obvious in the days following Macron's victory as his plans for the EU became more widely discussed in Germany. Macron is calling for a common finance and economic affairs minister, an economic government and a Eurozone-parliament that could decide on a budget and levy taxes. Moreover, he plans to introduce a "Buy European Act" limiting access to European public procurement deals to companies who base at least half of their production in Europe.

Last but not least, he aims to introduce a common Eurozone debt, a proposition resembling the call for Eurobonds – a claim opposed by Merkel and unpopular among the majority of German voters. To convince Berlin of his plans, Macron made sure that some of his most prominent administration members have close ties to German politics and have knowledge of both the German language and German culture: Prime Minister Édouard Philippe studied in Germany, chief diplomat Philippe Étienne is the former French ambassador in Germany and defence minister Sylvie Goulard is well connected inside the CDU.

Responding to Macron's ideas, the SPD has attempted to portray itself as a champion for a better, fairer and more protective EU at the side of the French President. Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel (SPD) has prided himself on the friendship he developed with Macron during the time they were both ministers of the economy. Indeed, as early as 2015 both published a [common newspaper article](#) calling for more solidarity and a deeper integration of the Eurozone.

Shortly after Macron's victory, Gabriel released a statement calling for an end to Germany's "orthodoxy in financial policy". Schulz has largely argued along the same lines. In an [interview](#) shortly after the election, the SPD-hopeful stated that he wants to endow his campaign with the same pro-European stance that helped carry Macron into the *Elysée*. He supported Macron's call for a deepening of the Eurozone and a common strategy for more growth, employment and thus, as he hopes, less populism in Europe. However, Schulz omitted the question of a common debt, well aware of the fact that this is likely to be unpopular among German tax-payers.*

On the other hand, the CDU's support for Macron reflects the hope he will finally achieve what the conservatives see as the main problem in France – namely the inability to introduce labour market and welfare state reforms. Concerning Macron's plans for a common Eurozone budget, Germany's finance minister Wolfgang Schäuble remained sceptical, stating that it would be complicated to change the existing treaties. "If we really want a stronger Europe", he said, "we first have to make sure that every country becomes stronger on its own." In one of her first statements after Macron's election, Merkel ignored Macron's calls for deeper Eurozone cooperation and dryly stated that she wants to "help, especially to decrease the unemployment rate in France". [Most statements](#) by CDU politicians followed a similar line, namely that France must become more competitive first, then one can speak about Europe.

Yet, the fear of a renaissance of mutual Franco-German resentments that the French far right and left have been drawing on in recent years also has its grip on the German conservatives. This together with the generally positive image Macron still enjoys in Germany provides a window of opportunity for the new French president and his plans for the EU. During his visit, Macron received an exceptionally warm welcome from Merkel. In a common press conference, Merkel responded to Macron's call for a reform of the EU by stating that she had never understood why some people thought the EU treaties could not be changed – a remarkable statement which to some extent openly contradicted Schäuble.

She continued by noting that if the German people understand the “what and why”, she would not stand in the way of new ideas for a better Europe. Shortly after, even [Schäuble conceded](#) that a monetary union needed balance between its stronger and weaker members. How serious the efforts on both sides are remains to be seen. We will get a first taste of what the new Franco-German cooperation might look like in July, when the first joint Franco-German cabinet meeting will take place. What is sure, however, is that a truly successful cooperation that can see off the resurgence of anti-German resentment and make Germans more open to fiscal integration will rely on Macron's capacity to implement reforms, as well as on the German political elite's will to abandon old orthodoxies.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics. Featured image via jutarnji.hr.

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