Legacy of German Reunification

A view from the neighbours

The reunification of Germany has been a key event in recent European history. It is also a turning point in the construction of the European Union and the democratic transition in Central and Eastern Europe. German unity may seem obvious today – especially for young generations – but in 1990, the prospect of a reunification between East and West Germany aroused strong reactions from its neighbours. The difficult historical relations of Germany with these countries have also played a role. As such, German reunification presented an immense challenge for the entire European continent.

To address this issue, a special project was launched last year called – rEUnify. The aim is to put into practice an exchange of ideas on the current significance of German reunification in European neighbouring countries such as the Netherlands, Poland, France and the Czech Republic. A series of debates took place in all of countries of the participating institutions and included historical witnesses, local citizens and students in the discussion.

Participating institutions included the Jan Nowak-Jeziorański College of Eastern Europe in Wrocław (PL), University of Groningen (NL), Euro-Créative (FR), Europeaum (CZ) and the Institute for European Politics (DE).

In this special section of *New Eastern Europe*, we present the different national perspectives as a summary of the debates for a wider audience. They look not only at the challenges of the early 1990s, but also put the debates into today's complicated political and geopolitical context.

rEUnify

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From a fractious to uneventful relationship with the reluctant hegemon

German reunification from the Czech perspective

TEREZA NOVOTNÁ AND VÍT HAVELKA

Czech-German bilateral relations have become stable and rather uneventful. Since the fractious debates of the 1990s on past injustices, diplomats of both countries have sought to find a robust common topic for discussion. Even though Prague is viewed by Berlin as a more or less unproblematic partner that oscillates within the desired margins of German foreign policy, Germany would prefer that Czechia presents clearer positions on grand European and global debates.

When Germany commemorated the 31st anniversary of its reunification on October 3rd 2021, not that many people paid much attention. Despite the pandemic conditions, large outdoor festivities took place a year before to celebrate three decades of unified Germany. In contrast, the 31st birthday of the country was barely noticed. Among foreign dignitaries, South Korean Minister of Unification Lee In-young, a regular to the reunification events, was the most prominent overseas guest who attended the ceremony in the East German city of Halle last year.

Yet the celebrations in the capital of Saxony-Anhalt were indeed quite special for a very specific reason: it was the last occasion for outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel to give a big speech in front of her fellow Germans after 16 years at the helm of the unified state. Merkel did not disappoint. Her 18-minute-long address offered a thoroughly personal and touching reflection on her experiences as an "Easterner" in unified Germany. She took aim at an author of an article outlining the history of the CDU party, who called her East German background a "ballast". A few minutes later, she criticised another journalist who called her a German and European that was not born to be one but had to "learn" her German and European "citizen-ness". She then asked if there are two kinds of Germans and Europeans – the original ones and those who have to prove their affiliation every day.

In Czechia the 31st anniversary of Germany's reunification did not attract any great interest either. Czech President Miloš Zeman was confined to his residence due to his ill health at that time, while Prime Minister Andrej Babiš devoted the October Sunday to campaigning ahead of crucial parliamentary elections less than a week later. The 2021 commemorations of German reunification were nonetheless illustrative of two other broader aspects. Firstly, the Czechs – as well as most of their neighbours – are no longer concerned about the size of the "reluctant hegemon" in the midst of Europe. Since the 1990s the Czech bilateral relationship with unified Germany has been transformed from fractious to uneventful but with a vital bond. Secondly, it is now further afield in Korea, where politicians, academics and citizens look up to Germany for inspiration. This also concerns any dissuading lessons on how (not) to go about unifying two countries.

No reunification without the Czech (and Hungarian) contribution?

As Joachim Gauck, a leading East German activist and former German president once put it, "before the [German] unity, there was freedom." In other words, before any efforts to unify the country could come to fruition, there had to be East Germans who would start the fight for their rights and liberties within the former German Democratic Republic (GDR). In brief, the process of reunification began with the process of democratisation. The tearing down of the Berlin Wall on the night of November 9th 1989 has become an iconic symbol of the downfall of the East German state and the communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. Yet in many respects it was the culmination rather than the beginning of the democratisation process in the GDR (and CEE).

One can identify various other moments when the domestic situation in East Germany started changing before the system's collapse. These include the peace-

Photo: Lubomir Kotek / Courtesy of the European Commission

Young Czechoslovak students gather during a protest rally at Wenceslas Square in Prague. Less than ten days after the East Germans dismantled the wall in the midst of Berlin, the Czechs found themselves busy with their own peaceful Velvet Revolution on November 17th 1989 and transition to democracy.

ful demonstrations in Leipzig and other East German cities in September 1989, the visit of Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev to the GDR for its 40th anniversary on October 7th, and the big rally on Alexanderplatz on November 4th. The mass pressure on the East German leadership to allow free travel to West Germany, which ultimately resulted in the opening up of the Berlin Wall, nonetheless started in Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

In the spring of 1989 the Hungarian authorities began to dismantle a fence between Hungary and Austria with the goal of allowing Hungarian citizens to cross the border to buy better goods and services. The barbed wire was completely removed with a fence cutting ceremony on June 27th and the Hungarian border to Austria was fully opened on September 11th. Thousands of East Germans who watched these events via West German television decided to take their chance and went to the border in the hope of being let out. By the time that the Berlin Wall fell, more than 50,000 East Germans had fled to the West through this escape route.

Another large exodus took place via the West German embassy in Prague. By the end of September 1989, the embassy's Lobkowicz Palace hosted on its premises about 4,000 or 5,000 East Germans who had tried to reach Hungary but were stopped on their way. Negotiations that helped solve the East German refugee crisis were held on the margins of the UN General Assembly in New York. In the

end, the decision was taken to let the East Germans leave for their West German neighbour. However, they would have to travel through GDR territory in order to be officially "expelled". West German Foreign Minister Hans-Dietrich Genscher personally announced the news of free passage to cheering crowds of his Eastern compatriots from the balcony of the Lobkowicz Palace on September 30th.

The first train carrying East German refugees departed from Prague via Dresden that same evening and arrived at the Bavarian border town of Hof within several hours. Nonetheless, the free passage to West Germany functioned as a "pull factor" and a new wave of several thousand East German refugees arrived shortly to Prague's embassy and nearby areas. Another train transport was therefore organised for October 4th and 5th, while a fresh migration wave was temporarily halted by introducing visas for East Germans who wanted to visit Czechoslovakia. Yet the visa duty lasted less than a month and, on November 1st, the GDR government allowed free travel to West Germany for anyone who wished to pass through Prague without having to undergo the detour via East Germany. As a result, up to 20,000 East Germans fled to West Germany, whereas Czechia became the key changing station on their way to freedom.

The East German exodus may have also encouraged Czech citizens to start thinking about their own struggle for liberty.

The dramatic episode at the West German embassy in Prague was the first direct encounter for the Czechs with the unfolding events in the GDR that led to the fall of the Iron Curtain and, ultimately, the reunification of Germany. The East German exodus may have also encouraged some Czech citizens to start thinking about their own struggle for liberty and better living conditions. After all, the Czechs were confronted with many "Trabi" and "Wartburg" cars that were abandoned around Prague by the fleeing East Germans – a relative luxury good for many of Prague's inhabitants. The German federal authorities have always been very grateful for Czechia's assistance with the East German refugee flows and for serving as a transit country. A lively commemoration of the summer 1989 events took place thirty years later in September 2019, when the Lobkowicz Palace opened its gates once again and about 6,000 visitors participated in the "Road to Freedom" festival organised by the German ambassador to Czechia.

Nonetheless, it is a bit of an astounding paradox that, at the time of writing, the Czechs – both politicians and the public – are much less welcoming and accommodating to the new waves of refugees from the Middle East and Africa who want to use Czechia as a transit country to flee from oppression and economic hardships to the "West". Similarly, Hungary is now building – rather than cutting – a barbed-wire fence to prevent refugees from travelling through its borders. Despite

this, it is no exaggeration to say that without the Czech help, the road to German reunification may have developed quite differently.

East and West German views of reunification

One of the authors of this essay has previously argued that German reunification and the Eastern enlargement of the EU (including Czechia) illustrate two ways how countries and regions can undertake a unification. This involves transplantation and adaptation models of political integration respectively. To go into detail about both theoretical models as well as the two case studies would require at least another article. Here it suffices to say that once the prelude of democratisation driven by the East German masses (ending with the fall of the Berlin Wall) was over, the West in the form of Chancellor Helmut Kohl clearly became the moving force behind the reunification process. In the end, the GDR joined the *Bundesrepublik* within less than a year. At the same time, however, the standing of the East German actors – whether it was the people, oppositionists, reform communists, or the first elected government led by Prime Minister Lothar de Maizière – decreased from those who "pulled down the Wall" to those who dissolved their own state and joined another.

This is however not to say that the reunification of Germany was not welcome. The initial response of East Germans was indeed very positive. Not only did they reward Helmut Kohl with a resounding victory for his CDU in the first all-German elections in December 1990, but opinion polls conducted by Eurostat in late 1990 demonstrated overwhelming levels of support for reunification amongst both West and East Germans. Support was even higher in the East (93 per cent versus 85 per cent in the West), while those opposed to reunification amounted to only four per cent among East Germans and six per cent among West Germans.

Nonetheless, these headline figures mask more nuanced opinions revealed in other polls. In 2019, for instance, West and East Germans disagreed on who had benefited most from reunification. Thirty-eight per cent of West Germans and 22 per cent of East Germans think that reunification mainly benefited East Germans, while 15 per cent of West Germans and 28 per cent of East Germans see the benefits mainly for the West Germans. To compare these answers with the same question ten years before in 2009, 60 per cent of West Germans and 23 per cent of East Germans believed that the main benefits of reunification were for East Germans. At the same time, 18 per cent of West Germans and 34 per cent of East Germans saw the benefits mainly for the West German side.

Throughout the last 30 years, East Germans have therefore tended to view reunification as a kind of annexation in which they were afforded little opportunity

to input and influence the process. The manner in which reunification was carried out, such as the transplantation of West German political structures and direct economic, personnel and legal structure transfers from the West to the East, planted the seeds of discontent. East Germans' disillusionment with post-reunification developments is therefore not just down to – still – lower wages or nostalgia for the communist past, but to the ownership of the process.

Unifying Germany while improving relations with its Czech neighbour

Less than ten days after the East Germans dismantled the wall in the midst of Berlin, the Czechs found themselves busy with their own peaceful Velvet Revolution on November 17th 1989 and transition to democracy. Václav Havel, the newly minted Czechoslovak president, took the initiative and chose both East Berlin and Munich for his first state visits abroad on January 2nd 1990. Havel also launched a debate on how to deal with collective guilt. The state could apologise for the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans from the Czech lands after the Second World War or emphasise that the roots of these actions lie in the Nazi crimes that preceded them.

Nonetheless, the Czechoslovak government at that time was more interested in the future of the Warsaw Pact and withdrawal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovak territory. This is however not to say that the Czech ministers were ignoring German reunification. In fact, much like Warsaw, Prague was very keen that the external side of German reunification negotiations – the so-called 2+4 talks – guarantee Europe's post-war territorial integrity and Germany's borders. In addition, the Czechs would have liked to receive confirmation that the 1938 Munich Agreement was illegal from the start. This was however as acceptable to the wartime Allies as the Czech (and Polish) demand to participate in the 2+4 negotiations. In the end, unified Germany and Czechoslovakia signed an agreement on good neighbourly relations and friendly co-operation in February 1992.

The German-Czechoslovak agreement became a starting point for the Czech–German Declaration on Mutual Relations and their Future Development from 1997, which should have been the final full stop regarding wartime and post-war atrocities and different interpretations of history. Although the declaration has significantly improved Czech-German relations and represented the right step towards mutual reconciliation, including through the establishment of the Czech-German Fund for the Future, the question of compensation for the expropriated property of the Sudeten Germans and the validity of the so-called Beneš Decrees have become recurrent themes in Czech politics. This includes the 2012 presidential campaign and the ratification of the EU's Lisbon Treaty by President Václav Klaus.

Once the Czech Republic's accession negotiations to the EU were in place, the Beneš Decrees became a political headache that could have torpedoed the entire enlargement. Although the accession process – in line with the adaptation model – proceeded much less spectacularly than German reunification, with a team in charge rather than a single leader and over the course of several years rather than being completed within a year, a political solution to the issue had to be found. In the end, a special commission found the decrees "extinct", or not creating any new effects, thereby allowing for the Czech accession to the EU. Despite this, MEPs from the Christian Social Union (CSU) still voted against it in the European Parliament.

Current Czech-German relations and challenges

More than 30 years after German reunification, the process of uniting the two German states is no longer a topic in Czech-German bilateral relations. The Czechs perceive Germany as a single entity, albeit with a higher degree of regional diversity and structural problems. Moreover, peaceful and correct relations are the main goal of Czech foreign policy towards its western neighbour.

Nonetheless, if we look at other levels, we can observe different dynamics. For instance, a sociological research project has shown that Germany is considered an integral part of the Czech cultural and geopolitical sphere. The Czechs view themselves as a nation in Central Europe which all four neighbouring countries also belong to and where the Czechs strive for as good relations as possible. This is an important difference to the German perception. Germans would probably not include themselves within the same cultural area as Czechs. In their mental map, the Czech Republic is an Eastern European country, albeit one located closer than, say, Romania and Bulgaria.

However, for the Czech society, Germany represents its main point of reference. The Czechs constantly compare their living standards, values and infrastructure with their German counterparts – usually arriving at the conclusion that Czechia is underdeveloped and that "everything is better" in Germany. Much like during the communist period, when the GDR was seen as a privileged state within the Soviet bloc due to its geographical proximity and family ties with West Germany, Czech citizens would also say that the East Germans were very lucky when the two German states merged. This is because they did not have to work as hard to achieve a higher economic standard. It is therefore an irony of history that what is considered a huge comparative advantage by the East Germans' neighbours (this lack of a need to build their own institutions and economies by simply transferring them ready made from the West to the East, alongside the West's vast financial

backing) has been the cause of dissatisfaction with German reunification among the East German population.

The Czechs are furthermore cognizant of the fact that Germany is their closest trading partner and that the Czech economy is well integrated into Germany's supply and production chains. Nonetheless, this awareness contributes to two crucial side effects. Firstly, the Czechs are wary of any excessive dependence on German politics and, to a certain degree, even feel exploited by German corporations. These fears are partly reminiscent of the Czech-German struggle in the 19th and 20th centuries, when the two nations shared one state and the Germans were perceived as those having the upper hand and oppressing the Czechs. Secondly, this alleged dependency causes anxiety regarding political developments in Germany and raises fears of "what will be the next thing that the Germans will want from us?" At the same time, however, it is clear that Czech public discourse "falls" about five to ten years behind the German (and West European) one when it comes to "progressive" issues. This includes climate change, LGBT+ rights and racism. This delayed debate results in an equally delayed willingness to actually pursue policies directed at tackling these future-oriented topics. For instance, whereas Germany moves fast towards decarbonisation and sustainability, the Czechs still doubt whether they should proceed and even if decarbonisation will pay off.

The Czechs are wary of any excessive dependence on German politics.

At certain occasions, however, the former GDR appears in the current Czech public discourse. The Eastern *Länder* and their support for Alternative for Germany (AfD) is often described as a voice of rationality by more radical Czech citizens. At the same time, the Czech illiberal forces adopt the AfD's discourse at times that "they know how a dictatorship feels like". They therefore say that they can identify it easily when it is coming, pointing to the migration crisis a few years ago and to the recent COVID-19 anti-pandemic measures. Collaboration between the AfD and Freedom and Direct Democracy (SPD), a Czech far-right party, was indeed evident during the migration crisis. Former Czech President Václav Klaus has also attended various AfD meetings in (the Eastern parts of) Germany, embracing the AfD's Eurosceptic rhetoric.

This brings us to the subject of relations between Czech and German political parties. All the major German political parties have offices in Prague. They represent the main tool of co-operation between the Czech and German political groupings. The Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung usually communicates with the Czech Social Democrats (ČSSD) and labour unions, whereas the Konrad-Adenauer Stiftung has close ties with the Christian and Democratic Union – Czechoslovak People's Party (KDU-ČSL) and Tradition Responsibility Prosperity 09 (TOP09), the two

Czech Christian Democratic parties. During the election period of 2013–17, Czech politicians from KDU-ČSL also often visited Bavaria's CSU and worked with its representatives on Czech-German reconciliation.

All in all, Czech-German bilateral relations have become stable and rather uneventful. Since the fractious debates of the 1990s on past injustices, diplomats of both countries have struggled to find a robust common topic for discussion. Even though Prague is viewed by Berlin as a more or less unproblematic partner that oscillates within the desired margins of German foreign policy, Germany would prefer that Czechia presents clearer positions on grand European – and global – debates such as migration and decarbonisation. Czech diplomacy is however not able to come up with constructive positions, which significantly hampers any mutual dialogue. Nonetheless, it is important to point out that these rather "boring" bilateral relations are also the result of conciliatory Czech politics. In contrast to Budapest and Warsaw, Prague has not been provoking the EU, and Germany, with any heavy illiberal tendencies and limitations on a free press and independent judiciary. Unlike its two neighbours, the Czech Republic is a moderate EU member state, not a troublemaker.

In contrast to bilateral diplomatic relations, transregional co-operation flourishes, especially with regards to the states of Bavaria and Saxony that share borders with the Czech regions. In the borderlands, the Czech and German authorities have integrated their emergency systems, while Czech labour often commutes for work to Germany. In recent years, transregional relations have received a new boost through plans for a high-speed railway that should connect Prague with Dresden by 2027. It is therefore most likely that we will witness further integration and partnership between the Czechs and Germans at the regional level. The reunification of Germany will most probably remain yet another historical event that will be commemorated every year, but will not play any major role in the bilateral relationship.

Mutual lessons

Returning to Angela Merkel's emotional reminiscing during the 31st reunification anniversary, she did not forget to thank Germany's friends in Europe – West and East, including in the Czech Republic – for their support in overcoming the division of Europe and her homeland. The text above has also provided an audit of German reunification and the Czech contribution to it. Even though the Czechs – and other Central and Eastern Europeans – may envy the fact that the East German *Länder* did not have to build their democratic institutions and political and

economic systems from scratch, or to work hard over the course of several years to join the EU, it is this lack of an input into the reunification process that makes the East German population still hesitant about its benefits.

In the September 2021 federal elections, over 19 per cent of East Germans voted for the AfD, while ten per cent cast their votes for Die Linke, the traditional left party which is partially composed of East German post-communists. The German election results thus stand in stark contrast to the outcome of the Czech elections that took place only about two weeks later. For the first time in its post-1989 history, the Czech Communist Party did not enter parliament, while SPD, the Czech equivalent and partner of the AfD, reached almost ten per cent. This is about half of the votes of the AfD in Germany's East. With a degree of hyperbole, one could argue that it is the Czechs who are starting to resemble the West Germans – at least in their political inclinations – more than their East German compatriots.

When it comes to the outlook for the Czech-German relationship, we can presume that Prague will eventually have to come up with a constructive position on the EU's grand debates and cooperate with Berlin in areas such as digitalisation, automation and the energy sector. This is especially true given the fact that Czechia is not very likely to join the eurozone anytime soon. Should the current ambiguity persist, the Czechs will be forced to follow the EU's general consensus and German politics anyway. Such stagnation would however be a shame given the fact that Czech-German ties will not receive any significant boost and will continue to linger.

Needless to say, having an uneventful bilateral relationship with your largest neighbour is not a bad option at all. A boring relationship means that there are no disputes that need to be settled. For the Czech economy, it is beneficial if the country is considered a relatively safe and stable haven, where investors are not afraid of setting up their businesses. In the end, the Czechs – as well as the Germans both in the East and the West of their country – will have to hope that their mutual partnership will remain uneventful for the foreseeable future.

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A gap in Polish-German relations

KINGA ANNA GAJDA

Over 30 years have passed since Germany reunified and signed a pivotal agreement on bilateral affairs with Poland. Meant to signal the start of a new age of co-operation, the treaty's spirit has nonetheless been challenged by numerous issues both old and new. A renewed agreement is now needed to build a shared future free from the ghosts of the past.

The 1991 reunification of Germany was not met with indifference in any of the European states. Among the countries which expressed the greatest concern regarding this change was Poland. For this reason, when in 1991 both states signed the Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Co-operation, it was seen as a breakthrough moment. Both states started on the path towards reconciliation. Unfortunately, today we can see that not enough effort has been put into reaching this goal and much work still remains to be done.

A hole in the bridge

In the early 1990s three legal acts were signed between Poland and Germany with an aim to improve inter-state and people-to-people relations. They included the treaty confirming the existing Polish-German border signed in 1990; the Polish-German Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Co-operation; and the agreement on the establishment of the Foundation for Polish-German Reconciliation, signed in 1991. These acts initiated a series of cross-border initiatives, cultural,

academic and educational exchange programmes, and co-operation between local governments. As a result, economic co-operation has developed and flourished.

The implementation of these agreements was not free from the influence of various external changes. These included the NATO and EU enlargements (1999, 2004), the global financial and Eurozone crisis (2008), Russia's annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas (2014), the migration crisis (2015), the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–21) and finally Russia's current invasion of Ukraine (2022). These events have had an effect not only on the countries' internal and external policies, but also on bilateral relations. For example, the different policies of the Polish and German governments during the 2015 migration crisis led to unprecedented tensions in relations. In the same way, different policies towards relations with Eastern Europe and Russia have led to many misunderstandings in bilateral affairs throughout the 2010s and 2020s.

For these reasons, the consequences of the changes that have taken place since German reunification in Polish-German relations should neither be treated as static nor permanent. What seems to continuously affect them is the difficult shared history that has not yet been adequately addressed or overcome. Symbolically, one of the first warnings about this threat came from the German caricature artist, Walter Hanel, who drew a cartoon in which two architects of Polish-German reconciliation, Polish Prime Minister Tadeusz Mazowiecki and German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, find themselves on two opposite sides of a bridge. They try to reach each other and shake hands but cannot due to a hole in the middle of the bridge. This hole symbolises the past that hinders full reconciliation and unfortunately remains until today. Perhaps there was a time when both nations seemed close to this metaphorical handshake. Yet things changed for the worse in 2015 when the Law and Justice party won elections in Poland and began to instrumentalise old historical sentiments, using them for their own political purposes. Since then, the hole in the bridge has only expanded.

Lack of trust

It can also be said that the last 30 years of Polish-German relations resemble a sine wave, with positive and negative moments. Looking back to their beginning, that is around the time of the reunification, we can notice that in Poland, despite the country's official support for the process, many people were afraid of its consequences. The fear of a strong united Germany and the role it could play in Europe was even shared by Mazowiecki himself, who publicly admitted that he too worried that such a large state could affect the European balance of power. In a way,

Mazowiecki spoke on behalf of a large part of Polish society. Opinion polls carried out in March 1990 showed that only seven per cent of Poles supported the reunification of Germany, while 40 per cent were against it. This negative outlook was a result of both wartime memories and over 50 years of communist propaganda, which presented Germany as Poland's enemy. Paying attention to these factors, Michael Ludwig, then a correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Poland, warned that a lack of trust between Poles and Germans could one day be used by politicians to negatively affect bilateral relations. It turns out that he was right.

Polish political scientist, Aleksandra Trzcielińska-Polus, divided the first 25 years of relations between Poland and united Germany into three periods. The first period, between 1990 and 1998, was a time of reconciliation. Both states aimed to build new quality relations and focused on their common European future. At that time, Germany even became known as "Poland's advocate in Europe". The foundation for Polish-German reconciliation was established during this time and the legal situation of the German minority in Poland was agreed upon.

The second period (1998–2007) was the time of greater distance. It started with a Bundestag resolution passed in May 1998, which addressed the situation of historically expelled and displaced persons as well as the German minorities. The resolution described them as a bridge between Germany and its neighbours in the region. The resolution was not well received in Poland. In response, the Polish parliament issued a public announcement stating the need for "the inviolability of the Polish border and the Polish title to the ownership of property on Poland's western and northern territories". This period overlapped with Poland's preparations to join the European Union, which entailed signing various necessary agreements. Among them were those that regulated issues such as the opening of the German labour market to Polish workers.

The shared, difficult history was used to cast doubt on developing Polish-German relations.

During this period, this shared difficult history was used again to cast doubt on the otherwise improving Polish-German relations. The most divisive topic was that of compensation for Polish forced labourers and victims of German concentration camps, as well as reparations for the damages committed by Germans in Poland during the Second World War. The controversy around this issue was sparked by the activities of a German politician named Erika Steinbach, who was also the president of the Federation of Expellees from 1998 to 2014. Steinbach went on to establish the Centre against Expulsions, an organisation which also caused controversy in Germany. This organisation only worsened Germany's relations with both Poland and the Czech Republic. Among other things, Steinbach claimed that

Poland is also responsible for the outbreak of the Second World War and that millions of Germans were subject to forced labour in Central, Eastern and Southern Europe. This rhetoric brought on a new stage in the debate about the consequences of the Second World War.

As a result, the topic of German suffering and harm also came to the surface. It also became clear that interpretations of the post-war relocation of Germans from today's Poland differ greatly between the two states. While Poles describe it as a "resettlement", Germans often opt for "expulsions".

During this time, disagreement also appeared in other areas. This included more contemporary disagreements over such issues as the decision to go to war with Iraq (2003) or the voting system in the European Council. Krzysztof Ruchniewicz, a Polish historian and expert on Polish-German relations, called this "the period of unwilling indifference", which was pursued by the governments of both states. In Poland, the right-wing conservative party Law and Justice came to power for the first time in 2005 and formed a coalition with the extreme right League of Polish Families and populist Self-Defence party. This government started to pursue a cooling down of relations with Germany. In Trzcielińska-Polus's opinion, "The cooling down of relations and a decrease in mutual trust showed differences in interests and problems which in the previous period were silenced over and passed." This period of Polish-German relations was also characterised by a pivotal conflict over energy policy, especially with regards to the construction of the Nord Stream pipeline. Germany's enthusiasm for the project was seen to be disregarding Polish opinion.

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The third period (2007–15) was the phase of correction and aspiration to develop better neighbourly relations. In Poland, elections took place again and the government was formed by the centre-right Civic Platform. Evidently, this phase was characterised by a notable improvement in relations between the two states. This was true in spite of some natural differences. These included Germany's underwhelming response to the Eastern Partnership. Of course, Poland was one of the champions of this policy.

In 2008 Poland's Minister of Foreign Affairs Radosław Sikorski promoted a concept he called the "Partnership for Europe". It was envisioned to overcome the "stereotypical philosophy of Polish-German relations where the central point is unsolved historical problems, which are treated as obstacles impossible to overcome in allied co-operation with Germany." The year 2011 would prove important during this period, as it marked the 20th anniversary of the Polish-German Treaty

of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Co-operation. During its celebrations, both sides tried to highlight their desires to pursue good bilateral relations and the European dimension of this co-operation.

To seal this commitment, a shared statement following a special Polish-German roundtable was made available to the public. This expressed support for the German minority in Poland and Poles in Germany. As a result, a contact office for Poles in Germany was opened in Berlin alongside the Centre for the Documentation of Culture and History of Poles in Germany. Germany also announced that it would commemorate the memory of the Polish victims persecuted and murdered during the Second World War.

The most difficult period

These periods should be complemented by one more, namely the current era starting in 2015. Unfortunately, this may be the moment of greatest trouble regarding mutual relations. This is clearly the result of the activities of the Law and Justice government which came to power in 2015 and was later re-elected in 2019. This government, like no other in Poland's democratic history, sees Germany as a challenge, if not a serious threat to Poland's interests. As a result, it pursues a policy of distrust towards Berlin, implementing the exact scenario that Michael Ludwig had warned about. Piotr Buras, a Polish expert on European relations, notes that during this period Berlin and Warsaw have demonstrated significant differences in their handling of issues such as the pandemic, migration, ecology, energy and security policy. Yet, the main topic of dispute between the two states was Nord Stream 2 and Germany's "change through trade" policy towards Russia. This is in spite of Moscow's aggression in Ukraine that began in 2014. Like other countries in Central Europe, Poland vociferously criticised Nord Stream 2, which was supposed to transport Russian gas to Europe by bypassing the Central European states.

The full-scale Russian aggression in Ukraine in February 2022 again highlighted certain differences between Poland and Germany, especially with regards to military aid for Ukraine. It also exposed disagreement over the scope of EU sanctions imposed on Russia following the invasion. Here, we should yet keep in mind that Germany itself is quite divided with regards to assistance for Ukraine and support for its membership in the European Union. In former East Germany, for example, around 60 per cent of respondents to a *Der Spiegel* opinion poll stated that they were against future Ukrainian EU membership. At the federal level, the German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has also criticised EU sanctions on Russia. The Polish and German governments also strongly disagree over the distribution of the EU budget

and, especially, the conditions in which funding should be received regarding a country's adherence to the rule of law.

Thus, probably the only unifying moment for both states was the Bundestag decision to create a memory site in Berlin that would commemorate the Polish victims of the Second World War. Despite this, the conflict over the war has not ceased, with the Polish government continuing to demand war reparations from the German state as elections approach. Berlin refuses to agree to such demands, arguing that Poland had already given up such claims in the past.

During this last period (2015–22), Poland held elections in 2019 that were once again won by the Law and Justice party. As expected, this election result was not received with much joy in Berlin. The German media pointed out how Law and Justice had been destroying Poland's good relations with its neighbours and the European Union, expressing fear that these relations would only further worsen. Indeed, the rhetoric of Law and Justice has reactivated negative stereotypes about Germany in Polish discourse like never before. Namely, the image of Germany as Poland's "eternal" enemy has been widely promoted by many politicians and pro-government media.

As a result, different public opinion polls started to show that today's negative stereotypes about Germany are stronger than before. Also interestingly, they seem to be geographically correlated: the further away from Germany the respondents are, the more negative stereotypes they have. This is probably caused by a lack of direct contacts and the influence of public television. Even though the majority of Poles have no anti-German views, there has been a clear decline in positive opinions regarding Polish-German relations. These negative tendencies are confirmed by various opinion polls.

Different visions

Public opinion polls, conducted since 1987 by the Centre for Public Opinion Research (CBOS, a leading Polish opinion poll research institution), show that Polish foreign policy has an impact on the attitude of Polish society towards Germans and Germany. Specifically, the years and periods when Polish foreign policy is aimed at improving relations with Germany result in more positive attitudes regarding the country's western neighbour. In the same way, the years and periods when the Polish authorities pursue conflict with Berlin only encourage more negative attitudes within society.

Research also shows that Polish respondents tend to repeat negative rhetoric more than Germans. Thus, we can read in a 2016 report from CBOS that the "as-

sessment of Polish-German relations is influenced by the activities of the Polish government". Accordingly, the most positive assessments of relations were recorded in 1991 and 2015, while the most negative in 2007 and 2017. In fact, in 2017, over half of the respondents (56 per cent) evaluated these relations as average, 18 per cent as good and 16 per cent as bad. In the last group, namely those who believed that Polish-German relations were bad, over half (59 per cent) blamed the Polish authorities for such a state of affairs.

By 2017, the share of Polish respondents who thought that Germany and Poland have different political and economic interests also increased. Available research points to a worrying tendency indicating that many people in Poland no longer believe in any possibility of building good relations between both states. Poles are overall sceptical about Germany's growing influence in Europe and the world.

Poles and Germans not only have different views of their shared history but also different visions of handling current and future challenges. To illustrate these differences, we can say that Poles generally represent social attitudes characteristic of a more normative society, tend to be suspicious of social change and are more attached to tradition than Germans. According to cultural studies research carried out in line with the ideas of Geert Hofstede, Poles indeed show a high level of the so-called "uncertainty avoidance". This translates into a wider acceptance of strict codes of behaviour and a lack of tolerance towards unconventional outlooks and ideas. As a result, when a situation seems unclear or unknown, people tend to feel endangered. To avoid it, they prefer situations where they understand and control everything. They believe in the existence of absolute truth.

Poles and Germans not only have different views of their shared history but also different visions of handling current and future challenges.

German society, on the other hand, is culturally more pragmatic. It invests in the future and believes that truth is conditioned by the situation, context or time. Its members also have better skills when it comes to adjusting traditions to changing times. Sociological research also shows that there is a strong preference in Germany for deductive thinking and planning. This is the philosophical heritage of Kant, Hegel and Fichte. This is also reflected in the need for a sense of certainty and assurances that issues are thoroughly discussed and investigated. As a result, Germans prefer to compensate for their greater insecurity by relying on expert knowledge. Possibly for this reason, the German elite does not often comment on the changes taking place in Polish-German relations. Germans, more than Poles, are also more politically correct in public discourse. That is why, among others, they avoid categorical answers to key questions.

Asymmetries

Different attitudes towards history explain why in the 2020 Poland-Germany Barometer, almost one-third (30 per cent) of the associations that Polish respondents made in regard to Germany were related to war. This share represents a notable increase since 2016 when such associations were made by 21 per cent of respondents. In this group, terms such as "criminals", "occupiers", "concentration camps", "Hitler" and "world war" could be found. At the same time, only 14 per cent of associations made by Polish respondents indicated an image of Germany as an economically prosperous country. A mere seven per cent of respondents discussed German culture, tourism and language. The situation is quite different on the German side. Here, as many as 29 per cent of respondents point to culture, tourism and language when making associations with Poland, while history is mentioned by only seven per cent. Poles and Germans also differ in their perceptions of who is their most important neighbour. While for Poles Germany is still their strategic neighbour, for Germany such a partner is found in France.

Despite their geographic proximity and thirty years of co-operation, Poland and Germany are still little known to one another. However, Poles also seem to know more about Germany than Germans know about Poland.

In both countries, the main source of information about the situation in the other state is still the media. As shown in the 2011 CBOS poll, 20 years after Germany's reunification, the majority of Poles were learning about their western neighbour from the media, especially TV, press and the internet. Only 12 per cent of surveyed Poles admitted that they know Germany from personal experiences (such as visits to the country), while nine per cent stated that they have contacts and conversations with German people. These are mostly young people who go to Germany to study. More recent research shows that the situation has not changed much over the last decade and that the majority of Poles are still getting to know Germany through the television and press.

Positive balance, nonetheless

Władysław Bartoszewski is a former Auschwitz prisoner and Poland's former foreign minister (2000–01), who for decades had been an architect of Polish-German reconciliation. When reflecting on the 20 years of co-operation between democratic Poland and united Germany, he stated that while the documents signed in 1991 were the best that could have been produced, neither Poland nor Germany have used them in the right way. As a result, they did not solve many issues in their

mutual relations. Researchers of Polish-German relations were more optimistic in their assessment during the 25th anniversary of these links. They stressed various successes, established partnerships and mutual friendship. They praised the large network of contacts between politicians, artists, academics, the private sector and NGOs. Despite this, looking at the state of these relations today it is difficult to agree with this optimism. Realistically speaking, Bartoszewski was more correct in his perceptions.

Nonetheless, when compared with other historical contexts and various confrontations, we can say that the total balance of the last 30 years of Polish-German relations has been positive. Clearly, many good initiatives have been created in culture, education, academia, local government and trans-border co-operation. Due to this, many personal contacts have been established that did not even stop during the pandemic.

These areas are where positive change is taking place on a long-term basis. The Polish scholar Jolanta Molińska has analysed the consequences of the countries' 20 years of relations since Germany's reunification. She pointed to 11 areas of co-operation which allowed for the breaking down of negative stereotypes between both nations. They included co-operation in the framework of the Weimar Triangle, the partner cities programme, co-operation between historians, intellectual debates organised by the Copernicus Group, Viadrina University in Frankfurt am Oder, and mutual language instruction.

Without a doubt, the economy is the area that has seen the greatest success in Polish-German relations. Specifically, since the reunification Poland has become Germany's fifth most important trade partner. It now constitutes five per cent of Germany's foreign trade and is positioned only slightly behind France and ahead of Italy and Great Britain.

Youth exchange programmes and education have also been quite successful. In 2021–22 almost 7,300 Polish students studied at German universities, while German is the second most popular language taught in Polish schools. Cultural institutions also play an important role in building strong mutual relations. Partnership co-operation has simultaneously developed between cities and local governments. Each larger city in Poland now has at least one partner in Germany.

A new treaty?

During the Conference of Polish Ambassadors which took place on June 15th 2020, it was agreed that the 1991 treaty contributed to breaking down hostile attitudes and starting a constructive approach to solving disagreements. It was also

stressed that any challenge to earlier achievements within bilateral affairs should be stopped. According to the ambassadors who gathered at the conference, this has led to a situation in which Germany engages in consultations with France but not Poland. That is why on January 22nd 2019 Germany signed an agreement with France on mutual co-operation and integration known as the Aachen Treaty.

A similar treaty, between Poland and Germany, could prove to be a good instrument for renewing Polish-German relations. If not a full treaty, then a trilateral protocol could be added to the Aachen Treaty to include Poland. This could serve to revitalise the Weimar Triangle. This important political co-operation scheme established between Poland, Germany and France has been quite dormant in recent years.

A new treaty, as Polish political scientist Krzysztof Miszczak argues, could dismiss any doubts regarding the countries' shared responsibility for the future of the European continent. It could encourage stable development and the integration of both states in the areas of economy and defence. It could also include commitments regarding war compensations. Most importantly, signing a new treaty would strengthen the 1991 document and allow for a new stage in building positive bilateral relations and settling difficult historical matters. In other words, such a treaty could finally serve to fill the gap, which despite the passage of time, is still present in the bridge between Poland and Germany.

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Caution, "concrete utopias" and common threats

Dutch perspectives on German unity

FLORIAN HARTLEB, FLORIAN LIPPERT AND FRISO WIELENGA

Dutch reactions to the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification were, all in all, more positive than many Germans perceived them at the time. The main point of Dutch concern was the role that a united Germany would play in a (not yet united) Europe. Three decades later, some elements of the "concrete utopia" of a closer union have been realised. Yet, both countries also face massive challenges in the years to come.

"Holland finds it hard to say goodbye," wrote the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in October 1990 with reference to the division of Germany. This summarised the impression which many Germans had at the time: that the Netherlands were sceptical, or even hostile towards German reunification. However, this impression was – and is – simplistic and misleading, as a closer look will show us. For the Netherlands, a convinced "Atlantic-oriented" country during the Cold War, the reunification of Germany was not primarily a daunting prospect (as it was, for instance, at the beginning for the United Kingdom under Margaret Thatcher). Rather, it was both a challenging and promising development. Before the fall of the wall, for the Dutch foreign policy elite "the area east to the Federal Republic of Germany (had) seemed almost terra incognita." German reunification

and the EU's Eastern enlargement were thus two sides of the same coin from the Dutch perspective. They were both parts of a learning and development process which concerned, above all, the evolution of European integration.

A slow start

The German question "casts a shadow ahead", read a report from the Dutch embassy in Bonn to The Hague at the end of May 1989, a few weeks after the Hungarian government had begun to dismantle its part of the Iron Curtain on the border with Austria. Liberalisation in Eastern Europe, the authors assumed, could one day put heavy pressure on Bonn to deal intensively with reforms in Eastern Germany, the GDR. According to them, this was not necessarily negative. On the contrary, close intra-German co-operation or indeed reunification, embedded within pan-European integration, was deemed an "attractive" model.

On the other hand, the report also stated that the development could lead to diminished German interest in European co-operation in favour of an imposing pro-German outlook. This perspective would "force both West and East to reflect". Rather far away from such reflections was the first public reaction by Dutch Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek of the Christian Democratic Appeal (CDA) party. He viewed the reunification of Germany without European and Atlantic integration as "by definition not an issue". Despite this, keeping Germany integrated and anchored were the central concepts in The Hague, and the status quo ideas that had shaped Dutch politics on this issue since the 1950s set the tone. Just like the West German state, a united Germany would also have to be a member of NATO and the other western communities.

The growing importance of the German question only slowly led to more specific and concrete considerations in The Hague.

In general, the growing importance of the German question only slowly led to more specific and concrete considerations in The Hague. The only detailed analysis and policy recommendation in this phase came in September 1989 from the *Adviesraad Vrede en Veiligheid* (Peace and Security Advisory Council). This body was commissioned the year before by van den Broek and Defence Minister Frits Bolkestein to prepare an expert report on the changes in Soviet domestic and foreign policy and their consequences for Europe and western security. These changes, according to the council's report, offered the prospect of an end to the division of Germany. Even if reunification was not imminent, the German question had to be central both in current policy and in discus-

Photo courtesy of the European Commission

Helmut Kohl in the European Parliament in Strasbourg in 1990. Kohl was German Federal Chancellor from 1982 to 1998. He played a crucial part in the German reunification and thereby became the first Chancellor of the reunified Germany since 1945.

sions about future European security. In concrete terms, this meant showing understanding for the national interests of the Federal Republic and supporting them where possible: "Without an attitude of understanding, what could be achieved is what must be avoided at all costs: a receptivity of the Federal Republic to 'special offers' from the East."

It was in the well-balanced western interest to prevent German isolation in a changing Europe, and the further embedding of German *Ostpolitik* in the western community was a demand of the first order. Reunification, in turn, could only come about as a final step of far-reaching political and psychological changes in Europe. If the question of reunification was put on the agenda at an early stage, the authors of the report warned, this would have destabilising consequences.

The report was thus not free of contradictions. On the one hand, it claimed that the reunification question had become topical again. On the other, it warned against dealing with it at an early stage. Pointing out this ambivalence, the foreign policy commentator Jerome L. Heldring, in a commentary in *NRC Handelsblad* titled "Running Behind the Facts", noted that such talk suggested "that we (the Netherlands or the West; the authors) have some control over the course of the German question. Well, that is not the case." This was not an apocalyptic prophecy on Heldring's part, but a call to prepare for a faster and much less controllable development that would not easily follow the route outlined and desired by the Peace and

Security Advisory Council. Heldring was to be proved right. In The Hague, Bonn and other capitals, the idea that reunification could only be the very last step of a new European order still held right until the end of the 1980s. However, developments in the GDR had taken on a different dynamic, including a rapidly growing number of refugees, the Monday demonstrations and Erich Honecker's forced resignation. On November 9th 1989, the Berlin Wall finally fell.

Ambivalences after the fall of the wall

Like other countries, the Netherlands shared the German joy over this development. A wave of sympathy for the East German population swept through the media. Alongside this joy at the freedom of the GDR's citizens, however, confusion and uncertainty about the future of Germany and Europe were also palpable. The daily *De Volkskrant* spoke of moving images from Berlin that gave cause for optimism, but at the same time did not rule out the possibility of "an arrogant German unified state". Another publication, *Trouw*, expressed both its hopeful expectations and its uncertainty in a commentary titled "Praying in the morning … thanking in the evening?" It asked whether, given the speed of developments, there was still time for reflection.

Concrete political reactions, however, continued to be rather slow in the Netherlands. Even when the first reports about Chancellor Helmut Kohl's ten-point plan were received on November 28th 1989, the reunification question was not immediately discussed. But soon after his initiative, it was obvious that reunification had become an important international issue that also required a concrete Dutch outlook. Indeed, columnists, editorialists and other experts in the Dutch daily press had already been dealing with the developments in East Germany for weeks. After studying Kohl's surprising plan, Prime Minister Lubbers spoke in a restrained way about it. There was no mistaking that he, like many others, felt caught off guard by Kohl's initiative, which had been presented to allies without prior consultation. He did not want to be "too critical" and expressed "some understanding" for the chancellor's difficult situation. For the Dutch government, said Lubbers, the "aspect of European healing is in the foreground". This included "the community between peoples who speak the same language".

While on this occasion, Lubbers had carefully avoided the term "reunification", two weeks later, the Dutch parliament finally had to acknowledge that this question was very much on the agenda. The parliament debate which took place in December 1989 following the EEC summit in Strasbourg was then almost entirely dominated by the uncertainty surrounding German guarantees regarding a final

recognition of Poland's western border. The chamber reacted uneasily to the confusing signals from Bonn concerning this issue.

In the time following the debate, Prime Minister Lubbers repeatedly expressed strong caution and even mistrust concerning the German stance on the border question. This in turn contributed significantly to the false impression in Bonn that the Netherlands as a whole had a fundamentally negative attitude towards reunification. Overall, the Dutch foreign ministry took a more pragmatic approach. Even before the exact content of Kohl's plan was known, the planning department noted in a memorandum intended for Minister van den Broek that "The West (the Netherlands) can do little else but agree to Kohl's initiative. We have always been in favour of reunification in self-determination, while Kohl now also names the right parameters and timetables. Moreover, his plan can have a stabilising effect on the East German situation (and on the internal conditions in the Federal Republic)."

Similarly, in January 1990, the ministry's first detailed discussion paper on the matter was carried by a spirit of sobriety and realism, which formed the basis for future policy. The pros and cons were dealt with point by point. The line of argument against reunification was that Germany could become too strong, perhaps not militarily, but politically and economically. This could also mean that Germany would either dominate the EEC or lose interest in it. Thirdly, reunification would mean a defeat for Mikhail Gorbachev, with the possible consequence of undermining his reform policy. On the pro side, the fact that self-determination was part of the Netherlands' "fundamental values" was stressed, as was "the joy over the broken wall"and the great sympathy for the people's movement in the GDR.

Another argument in favour of reunification was that the GDR would become part of the western sphere of influence and that any other solution would "probably be temporary and unstable". Finally, the paper stated, it would be "unwise" to "resist the inevitable", as this would make it impossible to influence the process to some extent. Although the outlines of a future Europe remained necessarily vague, it was obvious that a united Germany had to be a member of the EEC and NATO.

Towards the EU

In the meantime, steps had already been taken within the EEC since the autumn of 1989 to strengthen its internal cohesion. This would ultimately result in the establishment of the European Union. In view of the importance The Hague attached to the EEC regarding the further integration of Germany and the pleas for a further strengthening of this integration, the Netherlands strongly supported this development. At the beginning of 1990, there had been talk of the parallel nature

of German and European unification. In the spring of that year, it became clear that developments in Germany were proceeding too quickly for this. The plans for the EU now ensured that the link between German reunification on the one hand, and the acceleration and deepening of European integration on the other hand, had nevertheless been established.

The Dutch government's concept of European integration, which was supported by all the major political parties with the exception of the Greens, was focused on the preservation of the achievements and structures of the western community as a basis for a future Europe. Regarding this focus, fears of future German power ambitions did not play a major role. Rather, from the Dutch perspective, it was clear that the "European House", which was already viewed with scepticism because of its vague framework, would disintegrate if its only actual foundation – the European Economic Community – was undermined. A glance at the map of Europe was enough to establish that Germany was a cornerstone of this foundation. The "house" could not be imagined without Germany.

At the beginning of 1990 there had been talk of the parallel nature of German and European unification.

The picture of sobriety and approval on the one hand and some criticism and uncertainty on the other is also mirrored in the results of public opinion polls. The day after Kohl's ten-point plan was announced, a poll showed that a majority of Dutch people (54 per cent) were in favour of reunification, while 27 per cent were against it and 19 had no opinion. Remarkably, it was mainly younger people who expressed a positive stance. Among older people, support did not exceed 45 per cent, and more than 35 per cent of Dutch citizens over the age of 65 were against German reunification. In surveys conducted in the following weeks, a large majority (up to 76 per cent) were in favour of German unity. The proportion of those opposed varied between nine and 27 per cent and those without an opinion between five and 25 per cent. As awareness spread that reunification was no longer a theoretical issue, the number of supporters dropped to 50 per cent in February 1990. It was precisely in those months of heightened unease that the reunification process accelerated and criticism of Kohl for his stance on the Oder-Neisse question grew. West German dominance in dealing with the GDR also became particularly apparent. The decline in the number of supporters of reunification was also evident in other countries, but was particularly clear in the Netherlands.

Finally, the Dutch media reported very extensively on developments in Germany in 1989–90 – mostly positively, but with certain reservations. They were also largely unanimous in their negative judgement of Kohl's attitude regarding the Oder-Neisse border. Journalists were also uncertain about the future of Euro-

Atlantic co-operation and the role Germany would play in it. From time to time, people made their unease clear by using suggestive German expressions such as *rücksichtslos* (ruthless) or *Heim ins Reich* (back home to the Reich). Some even referred to Kohl's *Blitzkrieg*. Many political cartoonists gave free rein to their powers of association, resulting in many cartoons with direct allusions to the Third Reich and the Second World War. If one were to focus exclusively on these aspects of image-forming, one would come to the hasty conclusion that the confidence of many commentators in 1989–90 had sunk to the level of the 1960s. However, this was certainly not the case. Rather, it was characteristic that approval dominated, but criticism, unease and uncertainty led to an overall picture that also revealed ambivalence.

Friction and (European) solutions

Some of the worries that had been addressed in the context of German reunification re-emerged in Dutch-German relations in the following years. In 1993, a conflict arose about the question of where the newly founded European Central Bank should be located, with Frankfurt ultimately winning over Amsterdam. One year later, Kohl, together with François Mitterrand, blocked Lubbers' attempt to succeed Jacques Delors as president of the European Commission. The Dutch media discussed these "defeats" in much detail and portrayed Germany as adopting an arrogant attitude towards its close ally.

In Dutch politics, questions about a (too) "German Europe" and of the EU's enlargement have remained issues of some discussion.

Old clichés were revitalised when the German company DASA took over the Dutch aircraft builder Fokker – an important symbol for Dutch industry. Debates took on a bitter and tragic tone after the 1993 attacks on a Turkish family in Solingen. The hosts of the popular Dutch Radio broadcast "Breakfast Club" called for listeners to send a postcard with the text "I am angry" (*Ik ben woedend*) to Chancellor Helmut Kohl. No less than 1.2 million people followed the call. In the middle of this debate, the Institute for International Relations published a poll among the Dutch youth concerning the image they had of other countries. Many participants considered Germans to be arrogant and aggressive.

Both countries reflected carefully on the results of the study. The lessons learnt led to a new dialogue in order to strengthen bilateral relations. In 1995, during two visits by Chancellor Helmut Kohl and one by President Roman Herzog to The Hague,

the question of how to overcome existing misunderstandings took centre stage. The following years saw an increase in productive co-operation. For example, this was seen in the framework of the growth and stability pact agreed in 1997 and the Treaty of Amsterdam. In Dutch politics, questions about a (too) "German Europe" and of the Union's enlargement have remained issues of some discussion. However, it was the German commitment to a wider Europe that was honoured by Prime Minister Mark Rutte, when on April 21st 2016 he awarded Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel the Four Freedoms Award and attested that "You are acting on the inner conviction that Germany and Europe have to be a beacon of liberty, stability, and progress for all." As such, the ceremony testified to "the remarkable improvement in German-Dutch relations since the fall of the Berlin Wall". The foreign ministers took the lead in intensifying co-operation between regional governments in both Germany and the Netherlands.

Both the Netherlands and Germany have been facing a growing wave of Euroscepticism.

Common challenges

Both the Netherlands and Germany have been facing a growing wave of Euroscepticism, closely related to the rise of new populist challengers. In 2005, 61.5 per cent of Dutch voters (turnout 63.3 per cent) voted against the constitutional treaty, causing a "German shock". Decisive for the *nee* side were forces from the far left and right. However, effects on the government could be observed immediately. On the very night after the referendum, the decision was made that in all official government documents, the words "European integration" should be changed to "European co-operation".

An exemplary case in the Netherlands regarding the populist anti-European turn is Geert Wilders, whose main focus has shifted from demonising Islam to Euroscepticism as his primary mobilisation topic. When in spring 2012 Wilders refused to give his approbation to a new government budget plan that was to meet more restrictive EU requirements, he declared Brussels as the new number one threat to Dutch sovereignty. Wilders, himself married to a Hungarian national, also campaigned against "Eastern Europeans" in the Netherlands and promoted a racist "registration website" regarding "disturbances" and other "problems" caused by them, stirring up outrage and provoking ten Eastern European countries to denounce the website. Wilders' thoughts on Germany are ambivalent. Being fluent in German and born in Venlo (close to the border with Germany), he has given

speeches in Germany on several occasions, such as in October 2010 in a Berlin hotel under police protection, and in 2015 for the anti-Islamic Pegida movement in Dresden. While responses to Wilders were mostly sceptical to negative, Germany did respond to the Dutch example in 2013, with the AfD (*Alternative für Deutschland*) starting out as a predominantly Eurosceptic project. With anti-migrant rhetoric, the party quickly gained popularity during the "migrant crisis" in 2015–16 and has been present in all the country's state parliaments and the Bundestag since 2017. Similar to the Netherlands, concerns, fear and prejudice could mobilise many voters. The AfD's initial stance towards Wilders, however, remained ambivalent apart from their common Eurosceptic and anti-migrant agendas. Shortly after the Pegida event in 2015, the AfD's leader Alexander Gauland stated in a debate that he would not have invited Wilders.

Having developed a more radical nativist outlook over the last few years, today's AfD is considerably more successful in Eastern Germany than in the West. It has subsequently mobilised frustrations related to the ongoing results of the German reunification process. AfD campaigns even attempted to make direct reference to the GDR's civil rights movement by copying the most prominent slogan of the 1989 peaceful revolution: "We are the people" (*Wir sind das Volk*). Today, the AfD and Wilders' PVV are part of the European far-right "Identity and Democracy" (ID) party and share a growing number of radical views. At the AfD's convention in the spring of 2021, a majority of delegates voted that Germany should leave the European Union ("Dexit").

While Eurobarometer polls clearly show that neither "Nexit" or "Dexit" are realistic perspectives and that the overall pro-European consensus is not at risk, classical consensual models of representative systems are being challenged in both the Netherlands and Germany. The decline of the so-called people's parties (*Volksparteien*) is also causing debate about the future of liberal democracy. In this context, Dutch developments – towards a fragmentation into more and smaller parties, and towards support for soft and hard Euroscepticism that currently exceeds 25 per cent – might serve as a warning to Germany. However, the AfD's current support is "only" around ten per cent. Lately, violent protests and demonstrations in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic have revealed further cracks in both Dutch and German consensus societies. From these perspectives, while the topic of integration – both on the national and the European levels – is more virulent than ever, the continuing threats to liberal democracy appear to be more substantial than many had expected in the early 1990s. In this regard, the way that the current Russian invasion of Ukraine might influence and shake up these threats remains to be seen. The most recent co-operation between Germany and the Netherlands in this context – joint artillery weapon deliveries to Ukraine

and plans to jointly drill for a new gas field in the North Sea – are representative of the EU at large, both with regards to the EU's short and mid-term concerns and the big open questions about its long-term future in the face of a fundamentally changing geopolitical situation.

Quest for the future

While the Dutch reactions to the fall of the wall and German reunification were, all in all, more positive than many Germans perceived them at the time, the main point of Dutch concern was the role that a united Germany would play in a (not yet united) Europe. Three decades later, after a phase of friction in the 1990s, some parts of the "concrete utopia" of a closer union have been realised. The Hague and Berlin are now playing important roles and acting in agreement concerning many main lines in European policies.

Yet, both countries also face massive challenges: right-wing populist parties and populist impulses in government policies, Euroscepticism, xenophobia, deepening ideological rifts within the populations, and most recently the Russian war on Ukraine. While the memory of German reunification is mostly addressed in the context of European integration and inclusion, it is occasionally also hijacked and misused for nationalist and populist purposes, as are other former idea(l)s of European inclusion.

German debates about the equality of East and West are as ongoing as the pan-European quest for a unified future. The complex and often surprising history of German-Dutch relations since German reunification can be seen as a key example of the complexities of this goal. More importantly, they show that yesterday's symbols and reservations cannot be a substitute for bold policies for tomorrow.

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More Europe in the face of realpolitik's return?

French perspectives on 30 years of German reunification

MARIE KRPATA

The current geopolitical situation has disrupted the European and global order, which were both consolidated in the 1990s and have been key factors in the modern German model. The Franco-German duo is currently facing new challenges and it will have to respond appropriately in a time when the EU's global influence is shrinking in the face of what some analysts call a "new Cold War".

On October 3rd 1990 Germany regained its full sovereignty through reunification. This was a defining moment for Germany, Europe and the entire world. Positioned at the centre of Europe, Germany became a major arena of rivalry during the Cold War and was then in the spotlight of world politics. The reunification marked the transition from a world divided into two blocs to a "new world order" dominated by the United States, which has revealed itself to be increasingly unstable. Moreover, the end of the partition of Germany paved the way for the unification of Europe through the enlargement of the European Union. At the same time, Germany gradually became Europe's leading economic actor.

For France, Germany's mounting confidence following its reunification raised concerns about its destabilising potential regarding Europe's equilibrium. France

perceived potential further enlargements and Germany's growing influence in Europe as factors in its own potential marginalisation. At the same time, the "Franco-German couple", which had already established itself as the European driving force during the Cold War, could accelerate the pace of European integration after 1990. Nevertheless, with the accession of states from Central and Eastern Europe and the European institutions' growing competencies, the "Franco-German couple" must constantly readapt and assert itself as a compass for Europe in order to remain relevant.

Even more so, in the face of the challenges of the 21st century, new thinking is required – more in European terms than in national ones. The world's decoupling, which could be glimpsed against the backdrop of US-China rivalry, seems to be materialising and accelerating with the war in Ukraine – at least to some extent. It poses many challenges for Germany due to the openness of its economic model and energy dependence. The fundamentals on which it bases its foreign policy are also being questioned, and its inhibitions in terms of defence policy are increasingly apparent. Within this context, Germany's potential evolution towards becoming a relevant geopolitical actor goes hand in hand with the EU's own shift towards increased global actorness.

The way in which France and the EU will be associated with the transformation of Germany's model will be decisive for European unity. Three questions are of crucial importance. Firstly, how could Germany assert itself in the world and Europe after its reunification; and what is the French perception of this German repositioning? How does Germany intend to adapt its model to the challenges of the 21st century? And what role will the EU, and in particular France, play during this transformation?

Germany's regained post-Cold War confidence

Reunification was a turning point (*Wende*) that allowed Germany to regain self-confidence. It was the first step towards Germany's "normalisation" into a "nation like any other". German unity meant that Germany had recovered its full sovereignty "over internal and external affairs" and that it could rebuild constructive relationships with its neighbours. However, the weight of history gave it a responsibility and a duty to remember, which explains its reluctance to commit itself too assertively on the international level.

Nevertheless, it did regain confidence as far as economics are concerned. Germany relies on the competitiveness of its industry, and its open economic model favours the export of its goods. By GDP, Germany has become the fourth largest

economy in the world and the biggest one in Europe. Its trade surplus made it the world's leading exporter for a long time. Globalisation, which gained momentum at the end of the Cold War, enabled it to expand its markets and forge links with newly industrialised countries, particularly China.

Due to historical reasons, Germany's renewed confidence as a global player was, however, limited to its economic strength and its action as a "civilian power". Germany defines itself within the EU and United Nations as an advocate of multilateralism and international law. Berlin assumed that its role is best played through negotiation and consultation, not through an assertive foreign policy based on military power.

In terms of defence policy, Germany remains reticent. Interventions in Kosovo, Afghanistan and in the Sahel region, for instance, focused on civilian operations. In contrast, due to its political system and institutional organisation, France differs from Germany in terms of external operations. The French president even has prerogatives independent of parliamentary approval. France and Germany also differ in terms of arms exports. While Paris considers them necessary to strengthen the European defence industrial base and make it competitive, Berlin is committed to better control of these exports by taking into account "questions of ethical responsibility".

Europe's centre of gravity shift

Franco-German relations are marked by the three bloody wars of 1870–71, 1914–18 and 1939–45. The rivalry between these two powers was later to be a determining factor in the construction of what was to become the EU. This construction process was an attempt to convert hostile relations into a project of peace and prosperity which is what makes the Franco-German relationship, at the centre of the European Union, a "special relationship".

However, at the time of reunification, German unity raised concerns in France, which feared the return of a Germany eager to dominate Europe. French newspapers such as *Le Monde* published the headline in 1992: "Should we be afraid of Germany?" During the Franco-German summit in Bonn between November 2nd and 3rd 1989, François Mitterrand replied to that question by saying, "No, I am not afraid of reunification." In a survey conducted in September 1989, 75 per cent of French people also answered positively to the question "Do you think that the German demand for German reunification is legitimate?"

As the prospect of reunification became more realistic, however, France's fears of a reunified Germany weakening and marginalising it within a new Europe became

increasingly evident. Mitterrand considered it "legitimate" that the Germans felt the "will to reunite". However, he also invited caution by stating that "the new German equilibrium cannot be achieved to the detriment of the equilibrium of Europe."

This feeling was confirmed by the moving of the German capital from Bonn to Berlin, which was seen as a sign of the direction Germany's European policy would take. Keeping the capital in Bonn, and therefore a three-hour drive from Brussels, would have marked the choice – centred around the Franco-German couple – of "maintaining privileged links with the capitals of the Western European states", whereas establishing the German capital 80 kilometres from Poland meant "anticipating a shift in the continent's political and economic centre of gravity towards the East". As Willy Brandt put it: "Germany does not remain the East of the West but becomes the new centre of Europe."

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The accession of Austria to the EU in 1995, followed by the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, which included the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, shifted the continent's centre of gravity. From a French point of view, this "risk[ed] coinciding with a strong extension of the Germanic zone of influence".

Rising post-Cold War challenges

Faced with the concerns of France and other European partners about the effects of reunification, Germany agreed to sacrifice the Deutschmark in favour of a common currency, the euro. This went hand in hand with further European integration, which gained momentum in the 1990s through the Treaty of Maastricht (1992) and the Treaty of Amsterdam (1997). However, it was a stony path. The war in Yugoslavia erupted in the EU's neighbourhood and the Treaty establishing a Constitution for Europe, drawn up with a view to be adopted 15 years after German reunification, ultimately failed. The Constitutional Treaty was replaced by the Lisbon Treaty, abandoning the mention of European symbols (common anthem, flag, motto). External shocks also affected the EU, such as the economic and financial crisis of 2009, the migration crisis of 2015, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. On top of such uncertainty various geopolitical challenges can also be added. These include growing Sino-American rivalry, on which the EU must endeavour to take a clearer stance if it does not want to become a collateral victim of the resulting world repolarisation. Of course, the war in Ukraine is also causing tremendous issues for Europe and its future.

Post-Cold War European construction should be seen as the continuation of Germany's reunification. The current geopolitical situation has disrupted the European and global order, which were both consolidated in the 1990s and have been key factors in the modern German model. The Franco-German couple is currently facing new challenges and it will have to respond appropriately, in an inclusive manner together with other member states, if it wants to proactively defend the EU's interests at a time when its global influence is shrinking in the face of what some analysts call a "new Cold War".

The *Zeitenwende* and Germany's new inclination towards more assertiveness

Heightened tensions at the international level, which are only increasing with the war in Ukraine, call into question a certain number of policy fundamentals including energy policy and economic policy, but also foreign policy. This repolarisation of the world represents a challenge of such magnitude that it cannot only be tackled at the national level but must also be assessed on a European scale. The geopolitical context and reorientation announced by Olaf Scholz on February 27th 2022 in a speech before the Bundestag are likely to change Franco-German and European priorities. Scholz's speech articulated Germany's intention to bolster its assertiveness in military, energy and economic matters, as well as in terms of its foreign policy to respond to these issues. By announcing a new *Wende*, the *Zeitenwende* (turning point), he intended to prepare the Germans for a new rupture of a magnitude comparable to reunification.

The war in Ukraine has shown that Germany's reliance on foreign trade and investment, as well as its belief that it could democratise authoritarian countries through economic interdependence, have been naïve. The internationalisation of its value chains is becoming Germany's Achilles' heel. This is particularly noticeable on the energy front, where dependence on Russian gas reached 55 per cent in 2021 (however, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, Germany was able to reduce this dependency to 35 per cent). Germany's previous claim that Nord Stream 2 was merely an "economic" and "energy" project, as well as its hesitation to include this gas pipeline in the package of sanctions against Russia, testify to Germany's inability to assert itself at the diplomatic level. Its timorous positioning in foreign policy so far has prompted authoritarian regimes to strengthen their assertive stance.

As for France, the energy crisis in the 1970s saw the country mainly shift its energy strategy towards nuclear energy. It also buys its uranium from multiple suppliers. Therefore, France is not currently confronted with the same energy chal-

lenge as Germany. The French model may however not be easily copied inGermany. The debates on EU taxonomy over the end of 2021 illustrate the Franco-German divide in this respect. Indeed, nuclear energy is unpopular among Germans and Berlin even decided to phase it out in 2011 after the Fukushima catastrophe. The last German nuclear power plants were set to close in 2022. However, the German government recently announced that it would extend the runtime of two nuclear plants as emergency reserves due to energy challenges caused by the war in Ukraine.

Germany will hence have to look for alternatives with a view to decoupling energy from Russia, which is also an ambition from a European perspective with regards to the REPowerEU plan. From a French perspective, the challenges faced by Germany confirm its call for European "strategic autonomy" – although Germany prefers the terms "strategic sovereignty" or "European sovereignty". This concept may notably be translated into reducing the EU's vulnerabilities resulting from dependencies.

Rethinking relations with Eastern Europe and the Balkans

As a result of the war in Ukraine, the question of a new European security architecture is arising. The war marks the violation of the principles and spirit of the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, established in 1990. This consolidated Europe's post-Cold War security architecture by condemning the "[…] threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any State […]". France and Germany, which have tried to find a political solution to the conflict between Ukraine and Russia since the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbas, are increasingly being criticised for what has been deemed as hesitant support for Ukraine. They now must regain credibility in the eyes of some of their European (and American) partners in order to participate effectively in the new European security architecture.

In addition to the question of Europe's security architecture, it is the EU's enlargement, and relations with its neighbours, that are essential. While the countries of the Western Balkans aspire to EU membership and regret the lack of prospects, three Eastern partners of the EU (Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine) have declared their intentions to become members since Russia's aggression against Ukraine. Moldova and Ukraine were granted candidate status at the European Council meeting on June 23rd and 24th 2022, while further reforms will be necessary for Georgia. The current difficulty lies in the need to enthusiastically welcome the new applications while remaining clear on the reforms necessary before membership can become effective. At the same time, the EU cannot afford to frustrate "long-time

applicants" with this differential treatment that may favour those new applicants over former ones.

Knowing the road to accession may be bumpy for the new applicants, France and Germany hesitated before supporting their accession claims. Beyond that, what is at stake in the long run are security guarantees for Ukraine, provided Kyiv asks the EU to act as a guarantor of its security and territorial integrity in possible future negotiations with Russia. In the assumption of such agreements being envisaged by Ukraine to end the war (on the condition of assurances regarding its sovereignty and territorial integrity), the EU must be a credible and respected actor capable of enforcing such provisions. This will greatly depend on France and Germany because of their specific role within the EU.

European priorities on the Franco-German agenda

The Franco-German relationship has been institutionalised in the Elysée Treaty (1963) and the Treaty of Aachen (2019), which provide for a rapprochement of civil societies, institutions, and players in cross-border co-operation. Beyond that, Germany and France aspire to be the "engine of European construction". However, the Franco-German couple is also marked by divergences in the European project that various crises, which multiplied from 2009, make increasingly apparent.

This was particularly obvious during the economic and financial crisis of 2008–09, when Germany embodied political leadership while France played a rather secondary role. Overall, the divide between the "frugal countries", on the one hand, and the EU's most heavily indebted countries, which had drastic austerity plans imposed on them, on the other, persists to this day. Certainly, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused a shift, with the suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact and the elaboration of the Next Generation EU Plan, in which the member states committed to common debt. These measures exemplify Emmanuel Macron and Angela Merkel's leadership capacities and powers of persuasion. But when returning to "business as usual" debates on the Stability Pact will resume, where some – including Germany – will advocate for balanced finances, while others – including France – would rather like to reform the pact and adapt it to the modernisation needs of the EU. This is especially true in terms of the digital and energy transitions, as well as associated investment needs.

Another bone of contention between France and Germany is defence policy, with Germany still holding a timorous and traditionally pro-American position and France wishing to bolster European strategic autonomy, including in relation to the United States. The war in Ukraine has painfully shown the EU's underesti-

mation of security threats and the unpreparedness of the German armed forces, which are far from alone in this case. The EU's "Strategic Compass" aims to respond to the shortcomings of European defence. However, the war in Ukraine reinforces the role of the US as a defender of security in Europe. Therefore, the EU faces a fundamental question on the place of European defence in the NATO Alliance. Similarly, how will the colossal investments mentioned by Chancellor Olaf Scholz on February 27th 2022 to strengthen the German defence be used exactly? Will they be compatible with defence initiatives on a European scale and employable for co-operation with France in particular, for instance in common arms projects?

EU institutions are part of the equation

Certainly, the Franco-German duo has often given momentum to the EU's political action, which undoubtedly requires political will and the assumption of leadership. If under this leadership the EU has shown itself able to quickly adapt over recent years to unforeseen events, notably during the COVID-19 pandemic, there are still calls to sustainably carry out structural institutional reform. The EU's adaptability was exemplified by its suspension of applicable rules in state aid, the protection of its critical assets against unfriendly takeovers from third countries, the creation of the Next Generation EU Fund, and the temporary suspension of the Stability and Growth Pact.

The EU's strength in consensus can also be its weakness given its lack of flexibility, responsiveness and efficiency.

The current decision-making process seeks to embody the spirit of compromise, aiming to avoid the domination of one or two member states over the others. The constant strive of EU institutions towards consensus is a strength on the one hand, but it is also a weakness on the other, as it is synonymous of lack of flexibility, responsiveness and efficiency. This is especially true in the face of issues that sometimes require immediate decisions and action. In domains where unanimity is required, this weakness is particularly felt. In order to circumvent possible deadlocks and render the EU as efficient as the dynamics of international relations require, the question of replacing unanimous voting with qualified majority voting arises.

The possibility of a further EU enlargement makes this issue all the more relevant to avoid stalemates. Voting could eventually require unanimity among what may be over 35 member states (in the maximum scenario). Such reform would however need to be adopted with unanimity, which again renders the prospect of it succeeding under the current circumstances improbable.

The reunification of Germany may have aroused fears of political marginalisation in France. German reunification was synonymous with Europe's unification as it hastened enlargement towards Central and Eastern Europe, which was seen as possibly resulting in a reduced weight of France in Europe. Benefiting from a unique 30 years of lasting post-Cold War momentum that was particularly conducive to multiplying relationships with international partners, Germany has managed to rise to the position of Europe's leading economic actor. Although it has often been criticised for its budgetary orthodoxy, Germany was regarded as a model to follow by some. In light of the war in Ukraine, the cracks in the German model have however become evident and were articulated by Olaf Scholz in his speech on February 27th. Nevertheless, there is also reason for hope in this otherwise quite sobering context. Germany and the 26 other EU member states responded to crises such as COVID-19 and the war in Ukraine with the adoption of the Next Generation EU and REPowerEU plans – both strongly supported by France and Germany. These prove their resilience and capacity to adapt.

The EU's modernisation agenda and the plan to strengthen the EU's technological and industrial leadership as part of the twin green and digital transitions – which might actually be accelerated by the need to decouple from Russian hydrocarbons – could be a first step in achieving increased EU assertiveness in fields like the economy and energy. Moreover, on defence, awareness regarding the unpreparedness of European military forces in relation to a conventional war pushed NATO and the EU to strengthen their co-operation. As a consequence, Germany also made major announcements which – if met with concrete implementation – may assert its position in international relations.

For Europe to emerge stronger from the war in Ukraine, it is necessary to adopt a truly inclusive attitude towards all the member states, including the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and the Baltic states. This must take into account their history and political specificities. Likewise, a clear policy on enlargement, particularly with regard to the Western Balkans, which has been lacking in the past but which was brought back to the fore with the war in Ukraine, is particularly crucial. Developing a Franco-German agenda around these priorities is all the more important for France as its credibility in these various areas is being increasingly questioned. NEE

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