



Georgia's European perspectives within the context of current debates on the EU's future: A Franco-German view

Dr. Barbara Kunz¹

As of 2018, the EU's internal debate has largely emerged from the gloomy state that had overshadowed it recent years: Brussels is again looking forward rather than focusing on crisis management. After the depression caused by the Eurozone crisis, the Brexit referendum and Donald Trump's election as president of the United States, much of the current debate focuses on taking European integration further in a number of fields: migration and border protection, as well as Eurozone reform and defense. The same applies to Franco-German relations. Paris and Berlin, the traditional (though not always functioning) "motor" of European integration, have formulated ambitious cooperation objectives, both in terms of bilateral relations and within the broader European context. After years of little engagement between the two countries, Emmanuel Macron's election on a pro-European agenda not only helped to revive the debate on Europe, but also to get the Franco-German relationship back on track. How well Paris and Berlin get along will be decisive for the outcome of the current European debate on increased cooperation, deeper integration and reform. This is why the Franco-German duo is also of key interest to Georgia: the realization of Tbilisi's European ambitions will, to a large extent, be contingent on how they are received in Paris and Berlin.

"Refounding Europe" and "A new start for Europe"

With the 2017 elections behind them, France and Germany now have a window of opportunity until 2021 to work on a common agenda for Europe. Both Paris and Berlin have made bold, pro-European statements: Macron promised to "refound Europe" ("refonder l'Europe") during his campaign and the new German government coalition made Europe the first issue in its coalition agreement, calling for "a new start for Europe" ("ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa") in its title. It is, however, important to look behind all the rhetoric. As welcome as it

¹ Dr. Barbara Kunz is a research fellow at the French Institute of International Relations' Study Committee on French-German Relations.

may be to have resolutely pro-European governments in two of the EU's key countries at a time of rising populism, anti-Europeanism and isolationist tendencies, not everything should be taken at face value. This especially applies to Germany. Berlin, although genuinely pro-European, may in fact be qualified as a status quo power in the EU context. While Macron makes proposals on how to reform the European Union, Angela Merkel's Germany is by and large content with things as they are. In other words, the current debate is not so much about two – a French and a German – visions on where the EU should be headed. A more accurate description is a French president trying to get his German colleague on board in order to implement his own agenda, while Berlin does not (at least so far) really have one. Moreover, it also remains to be seen how Emmanuel Macron's many proposals will add up to a unified vision for Europe. There is consequently considerable potential for conflict, or at least continued inertia as a substitute for open conflict, given that in two of the core areas – the Eurozone and defense – France and Germany are hardly on the same page. These two issues go deeper than leaders Macron and Merkel: French and German positions on monetary policies have always been very different, just like France's strategic culture and approach to defense are traditionally difficult to reconcile with Germany's. As a consequence, much of Berlin's and Paris' attention will be focused on issues on their bilateral agenda and the debate within the European Union will be mostly inward-looking. Events in the rest of the world, such as in the Middle East, North Korea or developments in the transatlantic relationship, will naturally also require focus, but are likely to absorb much of the attention left beyond internal EU affairs.

The Eastern Partnership in the ongoing debate: will democratization and Europeanization pay off?

Among the issues that are largely missing from the ongoing debates on the future of the European Union is the Eastern Partnership. At the national level, Macron's two major speeches on Europe, delivered in Athens on September 7, 2017 and at Paris' Sorbonne University on September 26, 2017, did not mention the Eastern Partnership or even EU enlargement. The German coalition agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD, concluded in February 2018, mentions the Eastern Partnership just once: the new federal government intends to intensify civil society dialog with the six countries in the partnership as well as with Russia.² Bilaterally, the Eastern Partnership has been mentioned once: in the declaration issued after the Franco-German Ministerial Council on July 13, 2017 when Paris and Berlin announced their willingness to open existing German formats for civil society dialogue to

² See "Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land," Coalition agreement between CDU, CSU and SPD, Berlin, 7 February 2018, accessed April 5, 2018, https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2018/03/2018-03-14-koalitionsvertrag.pdf;jsessionid=4B9A10CD345EE1B98033DE5D5F1B71A1.s3t1?__blob=publicationFile&v=2, p. 150.

French NGOs.³ Although this certainly is a welcome step (in particular in light of the the many civil society formats entertained by German NGOs and the lack of French counterparts), this can hardly be seen as a bold statement for the Eastern Partnership.

EU enlargement remains a sensitive issue, as clearly demonstrated by the accession of the Western Balkan countries. In the run-up to the 2019 EU Parliament elections, the conservative opposition has for instance already “accused” Macron of being in favor of these countries’ EU membership; *Les Républicains* party leader seems to be determined to campaign on a “no more enlargements” platform⁴. The Western Balkan issue is less controversial in Germany, although it is not unanimously welcome. In both France and Germany, it seems fair to assume that enlargement to the Western Balkans will require leaders to invest a lot of political capital – capital that will then be missing for further enlargement rounds. In addition to this general enlargement fatigue, there is a specific concern in the case of Georgia: the risk of importing a major geopolitical risk into the EU clearly dampens the appetite for offering Tbilisi a membership perspective.

The absence of a large-scale public debate may not necessarily be a disadvantage for Eastern Partnership countries. As far as approaches to the Eastern Partnership are concerned, a great deal of the engagement continues to take place below the radar of public debate and at a rather technical level. Association Agreements, including the one with Georgia, are widely considered positively.⁵ In other words, although enlargement may not be on the agenda, there certainly is an interest in the Eastern Partnership in general and in Georgia in particular: this includes a variety of fields ranging from security to migration to trade. In the current EU context, one of the major trends in the debate is about differentiated integration and “multi-speed Europe”. This first and foremost applies to the relations among the 28 (soon 27) EU member states, although the issue remains highly controversial.⁶ Paris is traditionally more positive while Berlin tends to be more skeptical; Merkel has nevertheless been backing calls for a multi-speed Europe, including at the 2017 Versailles summit, and she has supported several statements by Macron. Of course, differentiated integration also has an external dimension, even though this is not at the heart of the current debate. Although this idea is anything but new⁷, e.g. the Association Agreement may be seen as a form of differentiated

³ See Deutsch-Französischer Ministerrat, Abschlusserklärung, Paris, 13 July 2017, available at https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/_Anlagen/2017/07/2017-07-13-abschlusserklaerung-d-f-ministerrat.pdf;jsessionid=64783A0328E2B3DE8C233810A7940684.s1t1?__blob=publicationFile&v=4

⁴ Arnaud de La Grange, Marion Mourgue, « Wauquiez : On ne construit pas l’Europe contre les avis des peuples », *Le Figaro*, 15 November 2017, <http://www.lefigaro.fr/politique/2017/11/15/01002-20171115ARTFIG00316-laurent-wauquiez-je-suis-un-europeen-convaincu.php>

⁵ See e.g. a 2015 report by the French Senate on its ratification: French Senate, « Rapport n° 56 (2015-2016) de M. Alain GOURNAC, fait au nom de la commission des affaires étrangères, de la défense et des forces armées, déposé le 14 octobre 2015 », Paris, October 2015, <http://www.senat.fr/rap/l15-056/l15-056.html>.

⁶ See e.g. Eszter Zalan, „EU struggles with multi-speed idea,” *EUobserver*, 10 March 2017, <https://euobserver.com/institutional/137202>.

⁷ See e.g. Kristi Raik, Tanja Tamminen, „ Inclusive and exclusive differentiated integration: Enlargement and the European Neighbourhood Policy,” in: J. Jokela (ed.) *Multi-speed Europe? Differentiated integration in the*

integration, the notion has gained timeliness not least as a consequence of Brexit. This should also create opportunities for partner countries wishing to cooperate more closely with Brussels, while the political price tag for EU member state governments will be much lower than if they had to convince their citizens of yet another enlargement.⁸ Pursuing this path consequently appears to be a much more realistic option for all parties involved. In addition to the existing requirements on democratization and Europeanization, this would also offer the opportunity to build a relationship more solidly anchored in shared interests, thereby diminishing asymmetries.

Some recommendations to put Georgia on the Franco-German agenda

On a very general note, it is important to keep in mind that – the rhetoric on the Franco-German “motor” and the like notwithstanding – the main (political) concerns in France and Germany are not necessarily the same. Both countries’ national debates, as well as their ambitions for the European Union, can at times differ. There cannot, therefore, be a “one size fits all” approach to Paris and Berlin and their different approaches to the Eastern Partnership need to be taken into account.⁹ Both countries are important, but both countries have different priorities.

First, as cynical as this may sound, not being a problem can itself be a problem when seeking attention. This is of course not to say that Georgia should attempt to transform into a foreign policy “problem” for Paris and Berlin. Rather, in order to increase their interest, Georgia should emphasize the role it can play in solving problems. Much of the current EU debate revolves around problems that need to be solved. This notably applies to security concerns, in the South Caucasus or elsewhere – for instance, Georgia’s contribution to the EU’s military operation in the Central African Republic or to NATO’s operation in Afghanistan should not be forgotten. In short, the focus should increasingly be on what Georgia has to offer.

Second, the EaP is not a very prominent topic in civil society and think tank activities in France and Germany. In terms of civil society rapprochement, Georgian actors will likely find it a lot easier to find partners in Germany than in France. While Germany has a rich landscape of

external relations of the European Union, FIIA Report 38 (2014), Helsinki: Finnish Institute of International Affairs, pp. 45-62.

⁸ See also Bidzina Lebanidze, “Life without EU membership: The Case for a Multi-Speed EaP,” GIP Commentary #24, December 2017, <http://gip.ge/life-without-eu-membership-case-multi-speed-eap/>.

⁹ On this note, see David Cadier, „France’s policies toward the Eastern Partnership countries in context,” GIP Commentary, Issue #13, April 2017, <http://gip.ge/frances-policies-toward-the-eastern-partnership-countries-in-context/>, and Kornely Kakachia, “A Reluctant Partner: Georgian-German relations revisited,” PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 463, March 2017, <http://gip.ge/a-reluctant-partner-georgian-german-relations-revisited/>. For the wider context, i.e. (among other things) approaches to Russia, see Laure Delcour and Stefan Meister, “Russia and the Ukraine conflict: toward a long-term strategy,” in: Claire Demesmay (ed.) “Mind the Gap: ow France and Germany Can Spearhead Joint Foreign Policy Initiatives Now,” DGAP kompakt 4, February 2018, <https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/30467>

foundations (either state-funded “political” foundations, i.e. with close ties to one of the parties represented in the Bundestag, or independent), of which some are even present in Georgia, there are almost no comparable institutions in France. Moreover, these German actors’ financial situation tends to be a lot better than that of their very few French counterparts. As a result, civil society ties between Germany and third countries in general tend to be much stronger and more stable institutionally than French-third country civil society relations. Instead of attempting to build a separate set of bilateral partnerships, it might consequently be of interest for Georgian institutions to seek to “trilateralize” any dialog project from the outset, making use of the close, already existing ties between Germany and France. This allows for plugging into the networks German actors already have in France, rather than attempting to build up bilateral Georgian-French networks from scratch.

Finally, although France and Germany undoubtedly have considerable agenda setting power in the European Union, constellations other than the Franco-German bilateralism might also be of interest in advocating the Georgian cause. This applies, in particular, to the Weimar Triangle, composed of France, Germany and Poland. In light of the forces in power in Warsaw, instead of being a driving force generating ideas, the format currently is more of an empty shell when it comes to taking the EU debate further. Yet, for political reasons, the Weimar Triangle cannot be declared dead. It is consequently in need of a meaningful project to carry – and among the potential topics for such a project, the Eastern Partnership is high on the agenda.¹⁰ As important as Paris and Berlin may be, Georgia should therefore not lose sight of Warsaw.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

How to quote this document:

Barbara Kunz. „Georgia’s European perspectives within the context of current debates on the EU’s future: A Franco-German view“, Policy Memo No. 26, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2018.

© Georgian Institute of Politics, 2018

Tel: +995 599 99 02 12

Email: info@gip.ge

www.gip.ge