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Nouvel èlan?
**European context of Germany-France relations
under President Emmanuel Macron (2017–2021)²**

Introduction

After German reunification in 1990, building a united Europe was a priority in relations between Paris and Berlin. The Franco-German engine drove integration processes on the continent and became a model for other countries on how to overcome historical prejudices and build a network of mutual interdependencies. This has had its share of successes and failures, but it has not collapsed because of its solid foundations (The Élysée Treaty of 1963) laid by Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and President Charles de Gaulle. This ‘marriage of convenience’ has also been playing first fiddle in Europe in the 21st century. The leadership of Germany and France has not been questioned among their partners in the EU, albeit occasionally contested by some members (Barbasz, Koszel, Książniakiewicz, 2016).

Despite the considerable age difference between the two leaders, Chancellor Angela Merkel has had the best relationship with President Emmanuel Macron, compared to the other three French presidents she encountered in office. When she was appointed Chancellor, Jacques Chirac’s career (1995–2007) was coming to an end. Chancellor Merkel encountered difficulties trying to convince the vain and over-dynamic Nicolas Sarkozy (2007–2012) of her cause, though they generally quickly reached agreement on the most important issues. With Socialist President François Hollande (2012–2017), who was ironically named *monsieur faible* in France, at her side Merkel had to deal with the difficulties in the eurozone, the refugee crisis, Russia’s annexation of Crimea, Brexit, the rising tide of terrorism in Europe accompanied by populism and demagoguery, and the COVID-19 epidemic (Bollmann, 2021; Koszel, 2022).

The main hypothesis of the article boils down to the statement that the new French President, Emmanuel Macron, had a significant albeit ineffective influence on changing the dynamics of the European Union’s development, and transforming bilateral relations between Berlin and Paris. The research question naturally addresses the nature

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of the German Chancellor Angela Merkel's subdued and conservative response to the diplomatic offensive of the Élysée Palace.

The source materials used in this article are mainly the official documents of the two governments, specialized analyses and, partly, texts from the German and French press. The research methods used to study the issue include behavioral, institutional-and-legal, source analysis, decision-making, comparative and descriptive methods.

Macron's European offensive (2017–2018)

When François Hollande, dejected after poor poll results in his bid for re-election as French president, announced his resignation, the only names that mattered in the battle for France's highest office were those of the populist and demagogic National Front leader, Marine Le Pen, former Prime Minister François Fillon, leftist politician Benoît Hamon, and an independent candidate, Emmanuel Macron. The latter had served as Minister of Economy, Industry and Digitization in the government of Manuel Valls and ran as an independent politician heading the La République en Marche party. Macron focused his election campaign on Europe and profound changes in the EU, and he succeeded. After a victory over Marine Le Pen in the second round, Macron was sworn in as President of the Fifth Republic on May 14, 2017 (Endenweld, 2018; Fulda, 2018).

Macron was not a well-known politician in Germany. The electoral victory of conservative politician, former Prime Minister François Fillon, was hoped for there and Merkel invited him to Berlin during the campaign, in a bid to support his candidacy. Nevertheless, she was relieved by Macron's victory, as it prevented Eurosceptic Marine Le Pen from entering the Élysée Palace. Merkel also knew that in the election platform of his party La République en Marche from February 2, 2017, Macron unequivocally advocated rebuilding Europe only in close cooperation between Paris and Berlin (*Présentation du programme 2 mars 2017*).

The German chancellor was initially impressed by Macron's dynamism and fervent commitment to reforming the eurozone, deepening European integration and making the EU more visible on the international stage. She favorably responded to his domestic reforms aiming to make the labor market more flexible, and economic growth more dynamic. Macron was encouraged by Chancellor Merkel, who was convinced that the economic successes of France would further the recovery of the eurozone, facilitate essential reforms and help give the process of European integration some *nouvel élan* (Brizzi, Lazar, 2018, p. 78). She saw the new French president's visit to Berlin, made shortly after being sworn in on May 15, 2017, and his declarations of a "sincere, direct and constructive partnership" to be the signal for closer cooperation. Outwardly, they sought to create the impression that the renewed vigor of the two countries would spur EU mechanisms to work more efficiently and innovatively. They intended to prepare a Road Map of EU reforms in the eurozone, declared their opposition to demagoguery and populism, and – in domestic relations – to cooperate on digital, tax, defense and education policies (*Merkel und Macron kündigen Fahrplan*, 2017).

In his reformist drive, Macron counted on Berlin's quick and strong support. It was not by coincidence that the circle of his closest associates consisted of experts and advisors who spoke good German. According to the director of the renowned Franco-German Institute in Ludwigsburg, Frank Baasner, never before had the French president's immediate entourage been so competent on, and experienced in German affairs (Pistorius, 2021a).

There was no reaction to the French trial balloons in Berlin. Chancellor Merkel was focused on the fall 2017 Bundestag elections. The support in the electoral rankings for her main SPD challenger, the incisive and popular President of the European Parliament, Martin Schulz, peaked in March, beginning to drop in the following months. Merkel was thus able to celebrate success for the fourth time on September 22, but the problems with forming a coalition with the SPD and establishing a new government dragged on until March 2018. This was not conducive to intensive dialogue with President Macron on EU issues.

The starting point for the European offensive announced by Macron was marked by his July 3, 2017 speech to the Senate and Chamber of Deputies in Versailles. Recognizing that "we need a stronger Europe," he announced that France, together with Germany, would hold democratic conferences in the EU, open to anyone wishing to participate, in order to involve people more in EU activities and to reform the community in response to Brexit. Not budging on his ambitious EU reform project, in a speech in Athens on September 7, Macron demanded that Europe's new foundations be based on "politics rather than bookkeeping," a clear allusion to Chancellor Merkel's austerity policies. He categorically stated that these changes must happen now or never. He reiterated the main premises of this speech at the Sorbonne University on September 26, 2017, where he proposed that "a new partnership" be established with Germany in the form of a new *Élysée Treaty* by 2024. He called for the creation of a separate eurozone budget, the development of a defense union and cooperation among arms corporations. His list of EU reform proposals was long, including revisiting the old idea of reducing the number of members of the European Commission to 15 commissioners, creating a supranational list for the 2019 European Parliament elections, and reconsidering the future of the Common Agricultural Policy (*Initiative pour l'Europe...*, 2017).

The French leader's hyperactivity and the flood of proposals directed at Berlin were certainly troublesome for the subdued and cautious German Chancellor. Germany's 2017 election calendar meant that Merkel did not comment on Macron's statements on the fly, as she did not want her support for his proposals to become electoral fuel, especially for the populist Alternative for Germany (AfD). Macron, on the other hand, claimed that he had notified the Chancellor of the text of his Sorbonne speech in advance, and did not bring up any topics that could harm her election campaign (*Macron aux Allemands...*, 2017).

After the elections in Germany, Macron was primarily focused on healing the eurozone and ensuring its smooth functioning. The aggravated 2015 refugee crisis had already subsided in the second half of 2017, negotiations on the conflict in eastern Ukraine had reached an impasse, and negotiations with the British were to take a collision course in the future.

The multiplicity and variety of the French leader's valuable ideas on reforming the European Union did not receive the favorable response in Berlin that the Élysée Palace had expected. Macron had hoped for sympathetic reactions, while Merkel adopted the tried and trusted tactic of remaining silent and not taking a stand on many issues, which Paris additionally regarded as ignorant and lacking courage. By the end of the year, however, it could be seen that the determination and activity of the French leader was received in Berlin with a mixture of admiration, envy and anxiety. Martine Meister, a journalist for the conservative newspaper "Die Welt" wrote that "his speeches about political culture, about the future of Europe... are exemplary in content and form. Macron's appearance gives courage, his confidence is contagious." This, however, was accompanied by concerns that Macron might go too far in his reformist zeal, as the cost of implementing his projects would mostly have to be borne by Germany (Meister, 2017).

It was only after the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition government took office on June 3, 2018 that Chancellor Merkel addressed Macron's proposal to establish a European Monetary Fund. In a press interview, she backed the initiative for the European Monetary Fund to be modeled on the International Monetary Fund and make Europe independent of the US-controlled IMF, especially during the administration of the unpredictable Donald Trump. To support Macron, Merkel proposed the gradual introduction of a special, initially rather modest budget in order to erase the economic disparities in the eurozone. She also did not rule out the possibility of appointing a finance minister for the EU (*Europa muß fähig sein...*, 2018).

The idea of establishing a separate eurozone budget was the main focus of the Chancellor's meeting with President Macron at Meseberg Castle in Brandenburg on June 19, 2018. It was with the utmost difficulty that Merkel agreed to an essentially "two-speed EU," where some countries would be pushed to the periphery of the community; Macron had no concerns in this respect. On August 27, 2018, in his annual address to French ambassadors, the French president once again announced a deep reform of the EU and stressed the need for a "Europe of concentric circles" and "enhanced cooperation" among some EU members (*Konferenz der Botschafter...*, 2018).

Another meeting between President Macron and Chancellor Merkel took place in Marseille on September 7, and focused on issues related to immigration and the 2019 European Parliament elections. Commentator for the daily "Le Figaro", Arthur Berdah, stated openly that Macron's goal in Marseille was to "exploit the Chancellor's weaknesses and gain leadership of the progressive camp he wants to build" (Berdah, 2018). With respect to the reform of the eurozone, an investment budget, the establishment of an EMF and fair taxation of large corporations, especially in the internet industry, were mentioned. Determination was declared so that all major decisions would be made by the end of 2018.

At this stage, it was still possible to talk about mutual trust and loyalty. However, Germany's refugee problems and the declining popularity of the Christian Democratic parties among the public after the 2017 elections undermined Chancellor Merkel's position in the European Union and diminished her influence on solving the problems of the eurozone. Pro-reform President Macron took the initiative and led the effort to stabilize the eurozone, but the coronavirus epidemic severely slowed the European Commission's efforts (Koszel, 2022, p. 263).

In the fall of 2018, Chancellor Angela Merkel confirmed unofficial reports that had circulated for several months, saying that her re-election as CDU leader and thus her fourth term as chancellor would definitely end in 2021 and that another term as chancellor was out of the question. This decision was bolstered by her belief that her political strength was waning and by defeats in elections to the state parliaments in Bavaria, Hesse and Thuringia and Bavaria, where the latter saw strong AfD representation (10.2%) in local parliaments for the first time.

With the prospect of elections to the European Parliament in March 2019, Macron published a column containing a dramatic call for a proactive action plan in 28 daily newspapers of EU member states, where the key words were “freedom, protection and progress.” He proposed the establishment of a European Agency for the Protection of Democracies. He called on all Schengen countries to strengthen border protection and adopt a common migration policy with uniform standards for granting asylum. He advocated a new defense and security treaty that would define the responsibilities of EU countries in coordination with NATO. Every employee in Europe was to be guaranteed basic social benefits and a European minimum wage appropriate to each country (*Für einen Neubeginn...*, 2019).

The Aachen Pact

The prospects of Chancellor Merkel’s political retirement, concerns about the future of the EU after Brexit, the rise of demagoguery and populism in Europe, the governments in Hungary and Poland undermining the EU’s foundations, the growing distance between the US and the EU under Trump’s presidency, and internal political problems in Germany (reminiscent of the problems of the Macron administration, battered by the “yellow vests” movement) resulted in the revival of the oft-promised need for even closer cooperation between Berlin and Paris.

An improved version of the Élysée Treaty had been under intensive negotiation for months. It was presented in the form of a new agreement, named the Aachen Pact (Treaty on Franco-German Cooperation and Integration), signed on January 22, 2019, 56 years after the Élysée Treaty. At the town hall of the former court of Charlemagne in Aachen, both Macron and Merkel indicated that, in the face of threats such as rampant nationalism, France and Germany must unite their efforts. Above all, the treaty promised close cooperation in all areas of security, ranging from fighting terrorism to stabilizing the political situation in Africa. Mutual assistance in the event of aggression on French or German territory was ensured. Europe’s strengthened ability to act independently on the international stage was announced. New joint institutions were established: the Franco-German Defense and Security Council and the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly. France pledged to support Germany in its bid for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. A key announcement concerned the establishment of a joint Franco-German economic area. The development of new technologies and joint projects were to be promoted, such as in the areas of artificial intelligence and the space industry. Their aim was to boost the global competitiveness of France and Germany, especially vis-à-vis China and the US. The chapter on culture, education,

research and mobility included an innovative proposal to establish a Civic Fund to support civic initiatives, especially in the area of city partnerships (*Der Vertrag von Aachen...*, 2019; Formuszewicz, 2020).

The new treaty was to offer a new platform for deeper bilateral cooperation and, in Macron's reckoning, would facilitate reaching agreements on the European issues he prioritized. As early as the summer of 2019, he made no secret of his disappointment that the Aachen Pact had not been implemented as expected in Paris. He publicly made his German partners know that and criticized Franco-German relations for having long been described in terms of "waiting for answers." At the Munich Security Conference in February 2020, Macron complained about the lack of bilateral cooperation, called for a "common space" to be built in the heart of Europe, and warned against the "historic mistake" of Berlin and Paris parting ways (*Conférence sur la sécurité*, 2020).

Blamed for failing to respond to the French president's proposals and appeals even in Germany, Chancellor Merkel reacted with growing exasperation. She affirmed the different "mindsets and different understanding of roles" of the two countries. This was the case with previous presidents as well, but now Germany and France "in general terms" were in agreement and always managed to find a compromise. Merkel declared that both parties "were on similar wavelengths" on key issues, e.g., acting independently of the US and building a common defense policy (*Gewiss...*, 2019).

European autonomy in the area of security and defense

The new assumptions on the operation of security and defense and the strategic role of France and the European Union in the world, which was prioritized by Macron, were to lay foundations for a new European component in international politics. In October 2017, his ambitions for the EU to take global responsibility for security and defense were expressed in the *Revue stratégique de défense et de sécurité nationale*. Given the administration of new US President Donald Trump taking an irresponsible approach to transatlantic ties and the weakening of NATO, the document emphasized building "European strategic autonomy," better defining European security interests, pragmatically strengthening the CSDP, expanding deeper strategic partnerships, and prioritizing NATO (*Revue...*, 2017).

At this stage, an analysis drawn up by a large team of well-known German experts associated with the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Auswärtige Politik in Berlin largely supported the French suggestions and made concrete proposals to the new government in Germany after the elections. Deeper economic, social and security integration of the EU would bring strength and stability, which would be guaranteed by a close German-French partnership. The Merkel-Macron leadership could provide resistance to various actions against the EU by the US, Russia and China, and compensate for the negative consequences of Brexit (*Außenpolitische Herausforderungen...*, 2017).

The protracted conflict in Ukraine, the depletion of the EU's defense capabilities after Brexit, the civil war in Syria, attacks by Islamist terrorists in France and Belgium, and President Trump's first months in office all undoubtedly prompted Germany and France to take the initiative to enhance European security and defense. On

June 7, 2017, the European Commission launched the European Defense Fund approved by the European Council in December 2016. An EU summit on June 22, 2017 decided that a group of countries willing to build the defense core of the EU could do so. The Council decided to allow the launch of the Permanent Structured Cooperation Mechanism (PESCO), established by the provisions of the Lisbon Treaty to deepen defense integration by a group of EU countries. On November 13, 2017, ministers of 23 member states signed a joint notification on PESCO, and on December 11, 2017, the Foreign Affairs Council adopted a formal decision on the matter. This was certainly a breakthrough, as until then the EU had not had the political will to implement such a mechanism. The reason was mainly the financial crisis in the eurozone, which forced governments to make deep cuts in their defense budgets and further increased public resistance to enhancing defense cooperation in the EU.

Paris and Berlin agreed on the overall goal of boosting European defense industries, which was to be a priority source of supply for the militaries of EU countries. French Defense Minister Florence Parly and her German counterpart Ursula von der Leyen met in the context of two key military and industrial programs – the new European fighter jet and the tank of the future. In the case of the latter, the Rheinmetall and KNDS corporations were invited to develop an industrial proposal and carry out further analysis of the project and the R&D phase, starting in 2019. Germany and France intended to jointly build a 5th generation aircraft with a low radar signature. The modern fighter would enter service between 2025 and 2035. Opinions differed at the level of specific projects, however, the most important of which concerned the next-generation tank (MGCS) and the next-generation aircraft, in the development of which Spain was also to participate (FCAS). This was largely due to competition between domestic manufacturers (Dassault Aviation, Airbus, Eumet and Indra for FCAS, and Nexter, KMW and Rheinmetall for MGCS). Paris was mistrustful about Germany's promises to purchase US F-35 fighter jets and Germany's European Sky Shield Initiative, which used US and Israeli technological solutions, among others (Gibadło, Płóciennik, 2023; Sabak, 2018).

If Germany considered the construction of PESCO, the development of defense industries, the pragmatic line of the CSDP, and support for the current NATO structure to be solutions that satisfy the EU, in a speech at the Sorbonne University in September 2017, President Macron proposed the development of a defense union, involving the establishment of EU intervention groups, and the cooperation of defense industries. He was not satisfied with the PESCO format negotiated within the EU and proposed the formation of the European Intervention Initiative (EII) instead. This was part of the French vision of a Europe of Defense and a concrete attempt to form a group of countries ready and able to support France in military operations in Africa and the Middle East, for example. In 2018, the French president spoke about proposals to strengthen Article 42(7) of the Treaty on European Union – the mutual defense clause, and about the need to discuss a review of the European security architecture. Nine countries signed a letter of intent on the initiative: Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and the United Kingdom. As of November 2018, the project was implemented outside the EU framework (Gotkowska, 2019).

The concept of an operationally effective EII advocated by France was submitted after notifying the Germans, but the numerous foreign and security policy decisions

that followed surprised and sometimes even irritated Berlin. Chancellor Merkel's associates indicated numerous examples of independent actions taken by the Élysée Palace in the international arena that had not been agreed with Berlin. This included France's involvement in the Libyan conflicts, which resulted in the resumption of the civil war there (July 2017), unnecessary disputes with Turkey in the Aegean Sea (provocative naval maneuvers jointly with Greece and Cyprus in August 2020, the determination of Paris to crack down on the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and refusal to approve the announced customs union between the EU and Turkey), favoritism toward Russia (inviting Putin to France in 2017 and France's opening up to Russia in 2019 as a strategic alternative to China). The list of objections was further expanded by Macron uttering words that were unthinkable to Chancellor Merkel, when he spoke about NATO's "brain death" (November 2019), criticizing the fact that NATO members, the US and Turkey, were operating in Syria without making agreements with their partners whose interests were also at stake, and neglecting to renew the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty with Russia, which had expired in August 2019 (Kempin, 2021; *Für Frankreich...*, 2021).

Holding the EU Council presidency in the second half of 2020, Germany sought to take the initiative in EU security and defense matters thereby countering the French pursuit to develop military cooperation outside the EU – within the European Intervention Initiative and the French-led "coalition of the willing." With the support of the national civilian and military intelligence services of EU countries, the Single Intelligence Analysis Capacity unit of the European External Action Service (EEAS) presented a comprehensive analysis of political, economic and military, as well as complex hybrid threats to the EU. Germany fully committed itself to the EU working on a Strategic Compass which defined the principles of how member states should respond to crises and build the EU's combat capabilities over a 5-10 year horizon. According to the German Defense Ministry, the EU should adopt concrete solutions and clearly declare what it intended do in terms of crisis management, training of partners and the protection of the EU and its citizens, and what activities should be discontinued (Janoś, 2021). Germany, which highlighted the problems with the formation of EU Battle Groups and their combat capability so far, wanted the Strategic Compass to include a proposal for the formation of a 5,000-strong joint military force by 2025. This force could intervene in various crises without having to seek US backing. The Strategic Compass was officially adopted on March 21, 2022. The Council of the European Union described the new strategy as an "ambitious plan of action for strengthening the EU's security and defense policy" (Basiński, 2022; Frank, 2021).

Clashes over the election of EU authorities in 2019

Regardless of the problems Merkel was facing in European politics, and the months of cumbersome talks with the Social Democrats about forming a new/old government after the 2017 elections, the Chancellor intended to retain her influence over the appointments to key EU offices in 2019. Her main goal was to gain EU support for the nomination of a representative from Germany as president of the European Commis-

sion. In interviews, she openly stated that this would be more fair, since for over half a century only one German, lawyer Walter Hallstein (1958–1967), had held the post of head of the EEC and then EC Commission. The media were discussing the candidacies of former Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb, former Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny and the EU's chief Brexit negotiator and former French Foreign Minister Michel Barnier. Although the latter was the most experienced EU official, he was disqualified by the fact that President Macron had failed to affiliate his *La République en Marche* movement with any existing European political party. The chances for the nominations of Economy Minister Peter Altmaier (CDU) and Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen (CDU) were discussed in Germany. In late August 2018, Merkel gave her support to Manfred Weber (CSU), leader of the European People's Party in the EP, as a candidate for the President of European Commission. At a meeting with Weber on August 28 in Berlin, the head of the German government "had no fundamental objections," and thus Weber became a "concrete candidate" to head the European Commission (*Merkel unterstützt...*, 2018). There were many arguments for this solution. Weber enjoyed a good reputation in the European Parliament and he could be the best *Spitzenkandidat*, as head of the Christian Democrat parliamentary group. Weber made exaggerated claims about his good private relationship with President Macron, without whose approval no candidacy would be accepted. He skillfully mitigated the CSU and CDU conflicts over refugee policy, and his nomination could certainly reassure and satisfy the Bavarian Christian Democrats. Finally, Weber had a reputation as an independent politician, something that could not be said of von der Leyen and Altmaier, who were devoted to the Chancellor (Schiltz, 2018; *Manfred Weber...*, 2018).

At a meeting of the European People's Party in Helsinki on November 8, 2018, Weber turned out not to have any serious competitors. He garnered 79.2% of the votes, defeating the only challenger – Alexander Stubb. Weber's candidacy was not entirely a foregone conclusion. Macron dissociated himself from his friendship with the German candidate, openly criticizing his tolerance of Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orban in the EPP and delaying disciplinary action against Fidesz by EU institutions. In this situation, the name of the highly popular Socialist-backed Dutchman Frans Timmermans, who had consistently promoted EU principles and values, emerged on the political scene in Brussels.

Weber underestimated the determination of President Macron, who was against the idea of the *Spitzenkandidat* as the only, binding one, since the Lisbon Treaty does not give any specific interpretation in this regard. Macron unexpectedly recommended Danish Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, while not ruling out Timmermans or Barnier. Due to the poor performance of the German Christian Democrats in the 2019 European Parliament elections, Weber was accused of having been passive in the election campaign, which resulted in the defeat and weakening the EPP in the EP (*Jetzt soll Merkel Weber retten*, 2019).

A new comprehensive agreement on the division of EU offices was adopted at the G-20 conference in Osaka in June 2019. In view of the controversy, a decision was not reached at the European Council meeting held on June 20–21, 2019, and the issue was postponed until the following one (*Rada Europejska, 20–21 czerwca 2019; Weber kritisiert...*, 2019).

In their, respectively, reserved (Angela Merkel) and openly critical (Emmanuel Macron) attitudes to the *Spitzenkandidat* as the best and most democratic formula for electing the EU executive on the initiative of the EP, both leaders were fully supported by European Council President Donald Tusk. He wrote in his book that the European Parliament dominated the European Commission too much, and that it should be stopped from taking similar steps towards the European Council (Tusk, 2019, p. 244).

At an extraordinary meeting of the European Council on June 30, 2019, an agreement was reached on the election of the EU's top leadership. A non-confrontational Belgian, Charles Michel, was put forward as the new president of the European Council, a little-known Spanish socialist, Josep Borrell Fontelles, was the candidate for the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, and Christine Lagarde was France's candidate for president of the European Central Bank. Ursula von der Leyen was proposed as president of the European Commission. The highly rated Timmermans was not considered, despite the support from President Macron, Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez and the Scandinavian countries. His nomination was ruled out by the Visegrad Group countries, Croatia and Estonia voiced their reluctance towards him, and the European center-right expressed their opposition, continuing to support their *Spitzenkandidat* – Weber (*Grupa Wyszehradzka blokuje Timmermansa...*, 2019).

Regardless of this turmoil, the chair of the European Commission president was reserved for Germany. In exchange for his approval of the candidacy of Chancellor Merkel's close friend, former Defense Minister Ursula von der Leyen, Macron ensured the nomination of Lagarde to head the European Central Bank and the office of the head of EU diplomacy for Madrid. Formal decisions on the new authorities were made on July 2, 2019 (*Rada Europejska wyznacza nowych przywódców UE*, 2019).

President Macron was the undisputed winner of the election jigsaw. As a representative of the new liberal party in the European Parliament, Renew Europe, he managed to thwart the candidacies of both the conservative Weber and socialist Timmermans, and to question the purpose of maintaining the concept of the *Spitzenkandidat*, which he disliked. The choice of former Belgian Prime Minister Charles Michel as the new head of the European Council was to Macron's liking, as the former fully shared the French leader's enthusiasm for reforming the European Union. Macron had a good opinion of von der Leyen, who had "European DNA" and who sought to enhance Franco-German military cooperation as minister of defense (*Gastkommentar...*, 2019).

In a secret ballot held on July 16, Members of the EP elected Ursula von der Leyen as president of the European Commission, with 383 MEPs in favor of her appointment, 327 against and 22 abstentions. In a meeting with Macron, she agreed without discussion to entrust one of the most important offices, the internal market, to Thierry Breton from France (*Wen schickt Macron...*, 2019; Steins, 2019).

COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak

Blamed for failing to respond to the French president's proposals and calls for EU reform even in Germany, at the end of 2019, Chancellor Merkel was increasingly discontent. The mutual bitterness, tensions and irritations might have escalated

even further, had not been for the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which arrived in the EU in mid-February 2020. On March 2, 2020, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen established the Coronavirus Response Team to coordinate the European reaction to the outbreak. Large-scale procurement of vaccines, face masks and respirators began, and, in cooperation with the European Medicines Agency, the map of Covid threats was monitored on an ongoing basis (*Remarks by President...*, 2020).

The coronavirus pandemic spelled disaster for Germany's export-oriented economy, leading to stagnant production, and collapses of supply chains and cooperative ties. At both the federal and state levels, the authorities were well-equipped with legal instruments to combat this, but the scale of the threat went beyond what they imagined. To deal with the crisis, a special team (Kleine Corona-Kabinett), chaired by Chancellor Merkel and consisting of the federal ministers of defense, finance, interior, foreign affairs, health and the head of the Chancellor's Office, was set up to assess the situation on an ongoing basis and take countermeasures, alongside the government (Franzke, 2020, p. 327).

From the beginning, Germany's federal administrative structure handled the pandemic better than others. Merkel was aware that the federal states responded at different paces and with varying scopes of action, which resulted in significant delays. She advocated stricter measures, and faster and more decisive action (Moscovenko, Pistorius, 2021).

The situation was different in centralized France. In a TV address on March 16, 2020, Macron, concerned about the situation, ordered a lockdown as of March 17, 2020. By contrast, Merkel's concrete and calm televised speeches inspired respect and confidence among Germans, even as she said the crisis was the most difficult in post-war Germany, and a challenge to democracy.

The epidemiological crisis came at a time when Merkel was toning down her political speeches. Her only ambition was for the German presidency of the EU Council in the second half of 2020 to seal her own success on the international arena. Despite attempts by ambitious rivals from her own party to gradually remove her from decision-making processes, she quite unexpectedly was making the headlines in European mainstream media, epitomizing Germany in the fight against coronavirus in Europe.

Chancellor Merkel supported the idea the European Commission had put forward, and later pursued, to jointly procure the vaccine abroad, which was to prevent competition between EU countries on the one hand, and poorer EU countries receiving smaller amounts of it on the other. Yet discord came when Germany purchased an additional 30 million doses of the vaccine from BioNtech and Pfizer outside the joint procurement system.

On April 16, 2020, the "Financial Times" published an interview with President Macron, who was seeking to take the lead in combating the pandemic in the EU. In his view, the epidemic was a "moment of truth" for the EU which called for emergency measures to be urgently adopted, such as launching corona bonds. He warned that the EU would otherwise collapse as "a political project," and a lack of solidarity during the pandemic could lead to "populist anger" in southern Europe (*FT Interview...*, 2020).

Macron's message in this interview was addressed at Chancellor Merkel, as well as Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and young Finnish head of government Sanna Marin, all of whom shared the Chancellor's views. At that stage, they were not comfortable with member states jointly getting into debt to raise funds for economic recovery after the health crisis (*Macron drängt...*, 2020).

It could be seen that, from the beginning of the epidemic, Chancellor Merkel was aware that fighting it within the EU would entail huge expenditures, but the problem was how to raise the funds. In April 2020, the German leader proposed to increase the 2021–2027 EU budget, and declared that Germany was willing to increase its contribution. As was the case during the eurozone crisis, and for the same reasons, she ruled out the issue of eurobonds, an idea strongly promoted by EU members from southern Europe but especially strongly rejected by the Netherlands (*Einlenken...*, 2020).

The magnitude of the disaster, the prospect of EU economies collapsing and Macron's open pressure forced a change of plans. On May 19, 2020, in a videoconference, Chancellor Merkel and the French president announced a mutually agreed proposal for a €500 billion joint fund (Recovery Fund), to be financed by allowing the European Commission to take out loans on money markets via corona bonds. "This is a new path in the face of an unprecedented crisis," Merkel said, and admitted that making this decision was not easy for her (*Merkels 500-Milliarden-Kampf*, 2020).

The Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly was trying to take credit for overcoming the difficulties in fighting the epidemic, thereby emphasizing its own establishment and impact on bilateral relations. With this inspiration, on April 6, 2020, the ministers of health published a joint declaration entitled "Together against corona," where they called for European health sovereignty and launching corona bonds (Pistorius, 2021b).

Merkel and Macron proposed a four-pillar recovery model. In addition to the Recovery Fund, the health sector would be strengthened. This entailed plans to boost the EU's health capabilities, including the creation of a common supply of medical equipment and supplies, and coordination of vaccine procurement and treatment. Another pillar was about stimulating the modernization of the European economy and its business models, with a particular focus on environmental and digital objectives. Macron stressed that appropriate conditions needed to be created in the areas of climate, biodiversity and the environment. The model also entailed strengthening European sovereignty. The goal was to reduce Europe's external dependence and better protect European businesses by diversifying supply chains and promoting an ambitious and sustainable free trade agenda with the WTO. The final pillar also addressed the need to rapidly return to a fully functioning Schengen zone and internal market, as well as plans for further integration in areas such as digitization, energy and capital markets (Goßner, Lawton, 2020).

Germany's readiness to agree to issue corona bonds meant that Chancellor Merkel had broken German financial principles which she had hitherto adamantly stood by, but this was crucial for the European Commission to initiate the hasty preparation of concrete solutions.

Adopting the largest-ever EU budget and Recovery Fund, totaling €1.8 trillion, by the European Council in December 2020 was a masterstroke of the German EU

Council presidency. After the complicated negotiations, which continued until the last minute, Merkel said allegedly that “a stone fell from her heart.” Above all, she had to convince the leaders of the “frugal four” (Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands and Austria) that the crisis caused by the coronavirus called for an extraordinary response, and this was no time for belt-tightening. It was also about breaking the resistance of Poland and Hungary, which for weeks had rejected the disbursement of EU funds to rely on the rule of law and had blocked both EU aid to combat the coronavirus and the multi-year financial framework. The two countries relented only after lengthy summit negotiations, and it was Macron who announced at a press conference that the disbursement of European funds would be strictly conditioned on “respect for our values and the principles of common law” (*Conférence de presse...*, 2020).

On May 31, 2021, Merkel and Macron had a video conference at the Franco-German Council of Ministers. The main topics were the implementation of the Aachen Pact and new bilateral projects in health, culture and youth. Before the Bundestag elections, she met with Macron on September 16, during her last working visit to France (*Pressesstatements...*, 2021).

It should be noted that the French ensured Merkel’s parting with great politics would be a dignified one. On November 3, 2021, in Beaune, a wine-growing center in Burgundy, she was awarded the Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor from France, which declared its enormous affection and respect toward her (*Signes particuliers...*, 2021).

Conclusions

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the European Union was confronted with a number of overlapping crises and conflicts which forced the main states, Germany and France, to act as safeguards, so to say, who extinguished existing fires. At the same time, opinions and comments were voiced in Europe about the need to design a new resilient political model of the European Union and the need to restructure the existing institutional system of the Community. This had an impact on German-French relations and European expectations for the effective leadership of Berlin and Paris through the process of deep transformations that were intended to stabilize the EU for the years to come. Calls for introducing new European reforms brought Macron to the office of President of the Fifth Republic and stimulated a deeper drive to introduce a program of extensive changes in numerous areas of EU activity. His visionary and, undoubtedly, valuable and constructive proposals led to some confusion and caution among the audience, that was astonished by their number.

Chancellor Merkel, who was experienced in European politics, pragmatic and rather thoughtful, opted for gradual, well prepared reforms in the EU, where consensus among all EU member states was important. Her non-antagonistic style of politics gave the EU, at least until 2016, a sense of stability and security.

In the light of her experience of cooperation with presidents Jacques Chirac, Nicolas Sarkozy and Francois Holland, Macron’s pro-European fervor commanded the respect and sympathy of the German head of government. On many issues, she shared

Macron's views on radical reforms, but the list of divergences was extensive. She was skeptical of Macron's ideas on European sovereignty and strategic autonomy. She was in favor of much greater European defense efforts, but wanted to avoid the impression that Europe could become independent of the United States and NATO. The "strategic autonomy" slogan adopted by French diplomacy was intended to promote a vision of the EU as a superpower capable of conducting global policy on an equal footing with the US, China or Russia. The "superpower" of the EU was to be a remedy for the France's insufficient strength, which did not allow it to counter this threat, and which Macron defined as a return to the Cold War model of confrontation between two blocs (the US and China) (Maślanka, 2022).

There were also differences of a more ideological nature. Berlin opposed the broad financial European integration and multi-speed Europe promoted by Macron, among others. Merkel saw danger in the ideas of creating "coalitions of the willing" EU member states, which could lead to permanent divisions in the European Union. It was not by coincidence that the leading journalist of "Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung", Berthold Kohler, saw Merkel as a "compromise machine" (Kohler, 2021).

Although the Aachen Pact contained only vague statements on the future of the EU, growing problems in bilateral cooperation forced Germany and France to deepen their ties in ambitious projects (e.g., defense, economic, parliamentary, and civic cooperation, development policy, and climate protection). This was meant to confirm Franco-German closeness and show that the Franco-German integration engine was not idle. The growing divergences in solving key European problems were not concealed, though.

Macron, a reformist, failed to push through all his promised European reforms in his first term in office. His activism and popularity in the European Union aimed to compensate for his severe failures in domestic politics. The "yellow vests" movement that called for greater social justice (e.g., unemployment benefits reform, pension reform), combined with violent immigrant protests resulted in the emergence of a wide range of difficult problems. Macron was more in favor of reforms that benefited big businesses than smaller ones, which gave rise to him being called *président des riches* – the president of the rich.

In this situation, the European arena remained his only hope for success. In the 2022 election campaign, he successfully convinced voters that the foundations of a European superpower would be shaped by the Franco-German tandem. Election slogans about European sovereignty, strategic autonomy, a Europe that protects, reconstruction, power and belonging, coincided with German expectations, especially where deepening integration in the economic and security areas was concerned. After the September 26, 2021 Bundestag elections, the coalition agreement between the SPD, Bündnis90/Die Grünen and the FDP referred to France twice. It declared that defense cooperation would be enhanced within the framework of the Strategic Compass project with an emphasis on establishing joint command structures and creating a joint military-civilian headquarters. This new "strategic dialogue" promised to implement the strong German-French partnership established in the Aachen Pact and in the Franco-German parliamentary representation established in March 2019 (*Mehr Fortschritt...*, 2021).

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Summary

The purpose of the article was to analyze German-French cooperation in the face of the biggest crises and challenges to bilateral relations for France and Germany in the first two decades of the 21st century. President Macron's European offensive, with the EU reform package, was carried out in order to strengthen the role of Paris in European integration and international politics. Chancellor Merkel's experience in the European policy of Germany made her quite cautious in approving the ambitious, far-reaching reforms, which could add to the instability during an already difficult time for the EU.

Key words: Germany, France, European Union, conflicts, problems

Nouvel èlan? Europejski kontekst stosunków niemiecko-francuskich w okresie rządów prezydenta Emmanuela Macrona (2017–2021)

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu była analiza współpracy niemiecko-francuskiej w obliczu największych kryzysów i wyzwań dla relacji dwustronnych dla Francji i Niemiec w dwóch dekadach XXI w. Jeżeli mowa była o europejskiej ofensywie prezydenta E. Macrona z pakietem reform UE, to służyć miało to wzmocnieniu roli Paryża w integracji europejskiej i polityce międzynarodowej. Doświadczona w polityce europejskiej RFN kanclerz A. Merkel z dużą ostrożnością odnosiła się z aprobatą dla ambitnych, daleko idących reform, mogących destabilizować i tak trudny okres funkcjonowania UE.

Słowa kluczowe: Niemcy, Francja, Unia Europejska, konflikty, problemy