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Leadership in European crisis politics: France, Germany, and the difficult quest for regional stabilization and integration

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ABSTRACT



Over the past decade, the European Union (EU) has faced a number of severe crises threatening its core policy regimes and the future of its polity. Potentially existential crises, such as the Eurozone, migration, and Covid-19 crises, require political leaders who are able and willing to give orientation and provide stability. This article argues that France and Germany, as the Union's two largest member states, have been key for EU stabilization and (further) integration, especially in times of crisis. Thanks to their 'embedded bilateralism', France and Germany have available important resources that other member states and the EU's supranational institutions are lacking. Yet, the emergence of Franco-German leadership and its impact on EU stabilization and integration depend on the demand for leadership, reflecting the status quo costs across the EU and the supply of leadership as the result of relevant Franco-German capacities. Demand and supply factors explain the varying record of Franco-German leadership and stabilization in the three EU crises under consideration.

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Introduction

On 22 January 2019, the French president and the German chancellor signed a new treaty on bilateral cooperation and integration in the German city of Aachen (France Diplomacy, 2019). Marking the 56th anniversary of the Élysée Treaty, which at the time represented the culmination of Franco-German reconciliation and laid the foundations for their joint role in the political unification of Europe, the Treaty of Aachen once again reflects this double focus. On Franco-German cooperation, both countries commit 'to

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take their bilateral relations to the next level'. On European integration, they emphasize that the close friendship between France and Germany 'continues to be an indispensable element' thereof.

The Treaty of Aachen came at a time of high turmoil for the European Union (EU). The near breakdown of its common currency, strong migratory pressures at its external borders, and the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from membership added up to a 'poly-crisis' and fueled debates about a partial or full European 'disintegration' (Webber, 2019). Soon after, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered the worst economic recession in the EU's history, with strong destabilizing effects on Europe's single market and political cohesion. With respect to France and Germany, some scholars noted the pair's decreasing influence on EU policymaking and a bilateral asymmetry in favor of Germany (Bulmer & Paterson, 2019).

This article, by contrast, argues for the importance of Franco-German bilateralism and leadership in Europe. Regional integration scholars have long stressed the need for certain political actors to assume a prominent role and provide stability to a polity, such as the EU (Deutsch et al., 1957, chapter 2; Kindleberger, 1973, 1981; Ferrera et al., 2021). Political leadership is key in the case of EU crises, which are characterized by high levels of urgency and uncertainty (Boin et al., 2017, pp. 3–22) and bring with them the threat of disintegration (Schimmelfennig, 2017, p. 316). Leaders define and pursue common goals, establish public goods, and help in overcoming collective action problems. Without regional leaders and stabilization, however, policy regimes or the entire polity risk loss of functionality or, eventually, degeneration.

Leadership and stabilization in EU crises, this article holds, seem to stem primarily from the member states. Unlike EU supranational institutions, national governments usually have the necessary resources and political authority to take and implement far-reaching decisions (Van Middelaar, 2019). Among the member states, France and Germany stand out. As the EU's two largest countries, they are in an especially prominent position, making their consent at least a necessary condition for EU-level action during such critical moments. Moreover, as founding countries at the heart of European unification, representatives from both countries regularly stress the particular responsibility they carry for the stability and thriving of today's EU. Finally, due to their 'embedded bilateralism' in Europe (Krotz & Schild, 2013), France and Germany can draw from a unique set of political, diplomatic, and administrative ties.

The article develops and tests the conditions and means of Franco-German leadership and France-Germany's (potential) impact on EU stabilization. It applies a demand-supply model (Majone, 1996; Mattli, 1999; Schoeller, 2019) according to which *demand* for Franco-German leadership arises if

status quo costs for member states and common vulnerabilities have become prohibitively high. In turn, France and Germany *supply* leadership if both countries consider the benefits of leading and the potential gains involved to exceed its costs. Ways of Franco-German leadership include agenda-setting, consensus- or compromise-building, and coalition-building. If, however, there is little demand for bilateral leadership and/or France-Germany are not willing or able to provide leadership, the EU risks political deadlock and stalling.

The next section entails the analytical framework, introducing the demand-supply model of Franco-German leadership with respect to EU stabilization. The subsequent section presents the case selection, the methodological approach, and the data used. The empirical part tests the analytical model against the management, resolution, and impact of three recent EU crises, namely the Eurozone, migration, and Covid-19 crises. The conclusions summarize the main findings and point out avenues for future research.

Bilateral leadership and regional stabilization in the EU's poly-crisis

Crises of European integration may call into question key features of the EU polity. Such crises usually originate from disruptions and conflicts in the EU's core policy regimes, prominently including the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU or Eurozone), the Schengen area of borderless travel, and the single market with its four freedoms (the free movement of people, goods, services, and capital). Disruptions in these policy regimes become crises of European integration and EU politics when they threaten to 'spill over' to the EU polity and thus pose an imminent risk of disintegration. According to the prevailing view in the literature, European disintegration implies one or more dimensions: a horizontal one, i.e., the reduction in member states; a vertical one, i.e., the loss of competences of supranational EU institutions; and a sectoral one, i.e., the re-nationalization of formerly EU-level policy areas (Schimmelfennig, 2017, p. 316; Webber, 2019, pp. 13–14).

Scholars have stressed that such situations require political actors to provide leadership and stabilization, recently introduced as 'polity maintenance'. Ferrera and colleagues (2021) point out that polity maintenance is more challenging, and hence more important, in the EU than for nation states due to the Union's decentralized nature; limited supranational, Union-level resources; and comparatively weak bonds among citizens. Generally, polity maintenance means keeping the EU together and safeguarding its polity. For Ferrera et al. (2021, p. 1332), this is equivalent to the 'preservation of the territorial community', which corresponds to the first dimension of European (dis-)integration and implies preventing the (voluntary or forced)

withdrawal of member states. However, as this article documents, leadership and (successful) stabilization go beyond mere maintenance, as they further develop the EU polity and make it more crisis-proof. Leadership and stabilization might thus also involve the strengthening and expansion of supranational institutions, procedures, and policy areas. We thus consider (further) integration as a sub-form and one possible manifestation of regional stabilization. Both may result from successful Franco-German leadership during European crisis politics.

When – in crises – public goods¹ such as security, mobility, and financial stability are at stake, the political controversies over adequate measures usually have strong distributional implications about the costs and benefits of cooperation. Leadership and stabilization require an investment that goes beyond short-term and narrowly defined national preferences. To help in overcoming collective action problems, leaders must provide guidance and define common objectives (Schoeller, 2017, 2019). This involves symbolic strategies and effective public communication, including European frames (Ferrera et al., 2021). Furthermore, leadership involves the provision or securing of public goods which, in its absence, may only be produced in an inadequate amount (Kindleberger, 1981, p. 243; Olson, 1965, pp. 5–52). To fulfill this task, leadership requires assuming particular responsibility for the EU polity and ‘to take on an undue share of the burdens of the system’ (Kindleberger, 1973, p. 28) or, in Mancur Olson’s (1965, p. 36) formulation, ‘to bear disproportionate shares of the burdens of multinational organizations’ (see also Webber, 2019, pp. 40–52).²

However, in contrast to Kindleberger’s classic formulation (and others following in his vein), global or regional stabilization or integration may not come exclusively from one single state, but from a node of two countries or a small group of states, a ‘composite core’, as Karl Deutsch and his colleagues formulated (Deutsch et al., 1957, pp. 38–39). Joint, cooperative, or ‘composite’ leadership has the potential to increase the legitimacy of the enterprise since it reduces the risks of domination and thus becomes more acceptable for potential followers (Young, 1991). Moreover, pooling resources increases the overall capacities of a regional organization, while enabling its leaders to share the involved burdens. Crisis times deviate from situations of ‘normal’ EU policymaking in the sense that institutional competences are less clear, and the usual legal procedures do not apply. Instead, member states, and most notably national executives, must step in and ‘improvise’ because only they have the political authority and legitimacy to decide on indispensable crisis measures (Van Middelaar, 2019, pp. 4–5, 11).³

A Union of 27 member states displays a great variety of cleavages and national positions or interests. In fact, (re-)distributional conflicts among member states are often at the very heart of a European integration crisis. EU crisis management thus requires member states or groups of member

states to lead the way. France and Germany are the most obvious candidates for this endeavor: they are the largest member states, thus enjoying a pivotal position and ‘critical mass’ in intergovernmental decision-making fora where countries’ demographics, resources, and vote shares matter most (Gruber, 2000). Their joint economic, political, and institutional resources and capacities usually significantly exceed those of other member states or groups of states. For instance, the two countries alone account for almost 40 percent of the EU’s economic output, making Franco-German consent a necessary condition for every EU-level decision involving large amounts of money (Krotz & Schramm, 2021, pp. 49–50).

As founding countries, France and Germany have played a particular role in the European integration process and the development of today’s EU. Policymakers and civil servants from both countries share and often stress a sense of historical responsibility for the stability and thriving of the EU polity (interviews #7, #16). Moreover, France-Germany maintain a net of close bilateral institutional, administrative, and political links that is extraordinary in international relations and even in the densely institutionalized politics of the EU. Franco-German bilateralism, and the social expectations that arise from it, lead policymakers from both countries to take each other’s concerns into account when formulating national preferences (Krotz & Schild, 2013, pp. 29–43).⁴ Finally, empirical research shows that the potential for Franco-German leadership and impact is highest if the two countries share a joint objective regarding crisis resolution but start from different policy positions (Schild, 2013, pp. 27–28).

What is less clear, however, are the conditions and means for Franco-German leadership and their (potential) contribution to EU polity stabilization, development, and integration. In theorizing about the emergence and impact of Franco-German leadership, we draw from a large and well-established literature originating from public policy, international relations, and EU crisis politics. The article differentiates between a demand side and a supply side (see Majone, 1996, pp. 61–79; Mattli, 1999, pp. 41–57; Schoeller, 2017, 2019, pp. 30–33). While *demand* primarily refers to other member states calling for or at least endorsing bilateral leadership, *supply* means France and Germany offering leadership. In every crisis, there is usually a temporal order, in that (some) demand precedes (potential) supply. For analytical purposes, we thus first present demand conditions before turning to supply factors. In practice, of course, demand and supply often overlap. In addition, France-Germany might actually create (further) demand via bilateral initiatives.

Conditions and means of leadership and stabilization 1: demand

Demand refers to member states realizing the need for collective action to ensure stabilization or EU polity maintenance. To be sure, demand does

not presuppose the convergence or full accord of actors' preferences. Rather, member states' positions and their affectedness by a given crisis are likely to differ, and they will continue to differ. However, as Keohane and Nye (2012) note, a certain degree of interdependence between actors stimulates demand for common action. Interdependence, as an analytical concept, is defined as mutual vulnerability: when situations of crisis and the way they unfold and are managed have 'reciprocal effects' among countries, interdependence is high (Keohane & Nye, 2012, p. 7; see also Keohane, 1982, 1984, p. 78). In this event, member states, recognizing mutual dependence, seek to avoid the common bad. Cooperation and change to the status quo represent ways to prevent or mitigate joint losses or, alternatively, increase the prospects for joint gains.

The demand for Franco-German leadership is a function of two factors: first, enough member states must consider the status quo costs to threaten the EU polity so that they advocate policy reform and/or institutional change. This is likely to be the case in the event of a 'symmetrical' crisis shock affecting most, if not all, member states (Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022). Second, France-Germany must have available the resources or capacity necessary to address the given problem. If both factors are fulfilled, member states demand Franco-German leadership (or at least do not oppose it). In reverse, if member states are unevenly affected by a crisis and/or have available other promising options, national-individual or otherwise, the demand for common action and thus for Franco-German leadership will be low.

Hypothesis 1: If status quo costs and/or mutual vulnerabilities threaten the EU polity and France-Germany have available indispensable resources, demand for Franco-German leadership will be high.

Conditions and means of leadership and stabilization 2: supply

Supply, in turn, refers to France and Germany's ability and willingness to provide leadership and stabilization. Both countries will assume a leadership role if they consider the status quo costs to threaten the achievements of European integration, the functioning of EU politics, or the integrity of the EU polity. Political leadership rarely is fully altruistic but also serves the pursuit of high priorities and objectives of the actors involved. Thus, since leadership requires resources, France and Germany must consider the benefits of leading to exceed its costs.⁵

The two countries' central position in the EU and the imperative of 'embedded bilateralism' has two further implications: first, given their size and central role in EU politics, other actors, including the European media, usually and at first call upon French and German policymakers to take a stance and provide guidance in the event of an EU crisis. In view of the special responsibility for the EU polity that policymakers from both countries

regularly stress, one can also expect France and Germany – more than other member states – to make such leadership investments and go beyond purely national preferences narrowly conceived. Second, France and Germany will coordinate and offer leadership services even if the two countries are affected by a crisis to different degrees. Presumably, however, the incentives for rapidly aiming at joint positions will be higher if both countries are rather evenly affected by a crisis.

Hypothesis 2: If France and Germany consider the status quo costs to threaten the EU polity and/or consider the benefits and potential gains from leading to exceed its costs, they will supply leadership.

Ways of bilateral leadership and stabilization

There are different ways of Franco-German leadership. With respect to EU polity stabilization and development, these include setting the political agenda, forging compromises or consensus, and building coalitions or sub-groups of member states (Krotz & Schild, 2013, pp. 20–22). First, France and Germany might set the political agenda. Tallberg (2006, p. 24) distinguishes different forms of agenda management. Due to his focus on the institutional resources and information advantages of formal chairmanship, two forms – agenda structuring and agenda exclusion – are less relevant for our purposes. Alternatively, Bachrach and Baratz (1962) suggest that in addition to the exercise of power to initiate or veto proposals directly affecting others, an actor might also, in an anticipatory manner, limit the scope of relevant policy issues. This article considers the former, more tangible source of influence. Moreover, following Tallberg's first form of influence, Franco-German agenda-setting includes putting forward bilateral initiatives, pre-structuring EU-level negotiations, or backing proposals of other actors.

Second, France and Germany may forge consensus, both among themselves and at the EU level, through exploring and building viable compromises. Compromise-building, in turn, can take two different forms (Krotz & Schild, 2013, pp. 39–42): (a) bilateral compromises may emerge via an 'exchange' of complementary preferences following an additive logic. Here, France and Germany agree on bilateral package deals before both countries upload and implement essential preferences at the EU level. (b) Alternatively, following a 'convergence' of preferences, France and Germany may find joint positions and usually develop and implement single policy instruments. EU-level compromises imply that France and Germany, each representing a larger camp of member states, bridge differences and enable broad agreement. As noted above, the potential for EU-level compromises and consensus inspired by France and Germany is highest if the two countries start from opposite positions, since this constellation increases their common 'win set' (Webber, 1999, pp. 16–17).

Third, France and Germany build coalitions of like-minded actors. This approach is an effort to escape intergovernmental decision-making deadlock and promote stabilizing measures, policies, and ultimately EU polity maintenance and development within a subgroup of member states. Coalition-building can be either ad hoc and informal, or permanent and institutionalized. Examples of the latter include the Eurozone and the Schengen area. In such cases, France-Germany might only act on behalf of a limited group of member states. Moreover, going ahead, they might alter the conditions and options for other member states, prompting them to follow their lead (Gruber, 2000, pp. 33–58). Due to the political risks involved, and the concern of France-Germany to get as many other actors as possible on board, such coalition-building during crisis management usually is short term or takes the form of an option rather than a concrete measure.

Cases, methods, and data and source materials

Over the past decade, the EU has faced a whole string of severe crises and basic challenges. Among them, the Eurozone, migration, and Covid-19 crises stand out. All three crises were stress tests for a specific prominent policy regime, namely the single currency, borderless travel, and the single market. Soon, however, they evolved into threats to the entire European integration project, the functioning of the EU, and the integrity of the EU polity. Each crisis was characterized by high levels of urgency and uncertainty; distributional implications for and among member states; and the absence of established institutional procedures and competences. Due to such characteristics, these three polity crises differed from other instances of recent EU turmoil, such as Brexit.⁶

To probe the analytical framework and to confront the two hypotheses developed above with empirics, the article examines the three crises in chronological order. For each crisis, we first give some background information and demonstrate the crisis problem pressure, before analyzing the demand conditions and supply factors in turn. Then, we scrutinize the ways of bilateral leadership. We conclude each case study with an assessment of the successes and/or failures of Franco-German EU stabilization and development.

In terms of methods, for each crisis, the article puts the analytical framework to a plausibility probe with the empirical record. The hypotheses suggest specific 'observable manifestations' (Beach & Pedersen, 2019). One should thus, according to the hypotheses and the conditions fulfilled (or not), find evidence of a prominent part for France-Germany during the respective crisis; an increase in bilateral activities and coordination once the crisis deepens; the presence of at least some examples of Franco-German leadership outlined above; and a decisive role of France-Germany

for EU crisis resolution. Moreover, a Franco-German impact on crisis management and stabilization presupposes EU-level outcomes to reflect Franco-German positions and declared objectives.

Importantly, Franco-German leadership and stabilization does not necessarily imply the absence of leadership activities on the part of other actors. Franco-German leadership and European Commission leadership, for instance, do not constitute a zero-sum game.⁷ Yet, when there is high time pressure and strong (re-)distributional consequences, EU member states – and particularly the two largest ones – are expected to move center stage. Moreover, if other actors played an important part, the argument of a decisive Franco-German impact on EU polity maintenance requires at least support or endorsement by France-Germany for the leadership supplied by these actors. If, by contrast, France-Germany do not play a decisive role, and supranational actors do not take the lead with Franco-German backing – or if supranational actors or other member states explicitly act against Franco-German proposals – bilateral leadership has either been absent or failed.

In terms of data and source materials, the article relies on several primary sources including European Council conclusions, EU and national policy documents, and Franco-German declarations; newspaper reports and press materials; and a wide and diverse range of secondary literature. It triangulates these with information gained in 18 semi-structured interviews with policymakers and civil servants from France, Germany, the European Commission, the Council of the EU, and four national Permanent Representations to the EU, which we conducted in spring 2018, late 2020, and early 2021, respectively.

The Eurozone crisis

The Eurozone crisis resulted from the global financial crisis starting in 2007. It threatened the survival of the single currency and the integrity of Europe's monetary union. The Eurozone aims at providing European public goods such as stable and low interest rates, financial stability, and increased economic activity. EMU is one of the most integrated EU policy regimes due to the dense net of national economic and financial relations, high member-state interdependence, and an independent and powerful European Central Bank (ECB) in charge of monetary policy. The single currency is also one of the most symbolic policy regimes, given its high visibility and the political importance that member states traditionally have devoted to monetary integration.

Demand for leadership and stabilization

Starting in early 2010, bank failures and rising sovereign debt brought several member states to the brink of insolvency. Greece, the most dramatic case,

would receive three financial rescue packages from other member states and international institutions between 2010 and 2015. Other countries facing high and potentially unsustainable refinancing costs included Ireland, Portugal, Spain, and Cyprus. For those countries, leaving EMU would have drastically devalued their (to be re-introduced) national currencies and might have cut them off from the financial markets. For the other member states, the departure of one country could have put the survival of the entire EMU at risk.

Several national governments thus called for financial support and more fiscal risk-sharing. As the EU's largest economy, Germany was in a pivotal position. Together with France, it would cover or be liable for about half of every European rescue package. Franco-German joint financial resources were even more important since the other three large EU member states – the UK, Italy, and Spain – either were not part of EMU or themselves faced serious financial problems. Thus, high and actually rising status quo costs, high vulnerability, together with the availability of crucial and potentially decisive bilateral resources, created strong demand for Franco-German leadership.

Supply of leadership and stabilization

France and Germany, at first sight, were affected rather unevenly by the Eurozone crisis. For its part, Germany throughout the crisis kept its top credit rating, could at times borrow at negative interest rates, and to some extent managed to compensate for its losses in European export markets through an increase in global exports. France, by contrast, lost its top credit rating in late 2011 (Schild, 2013, p. 27). On the other hand, however, French and German banks each had invested around €400 billion in the member states hardest hit by the crisis. This not only made the two countries' governments potentially subject to massive bank bailouts, but it also created uncertainties about the precise scope of the crisis and its further consequences if some economies were to collapse (Webber, 2019, p. 70). Thus, in accordance with Hypothesis 2, extremely high costs of bank bailouts and the prospect of an EMU breakdown should have incentivized France-Germany to supply leadership.

From the start, different Franco-German positions and priorities emerged. While in March 2010 the German government was at first reluctant to endorse bilateral loans for Greece, France's President Nicolas Sarkozy advocated fast and comprehensive financial measures. Importantly, however, France and Germany shared the overriding objective to preserve the common currency, with Chancellor Angela Merkel famously and repeatedly holding that 'if the Euro fails, Europe will fail' (Deutscher Bundestag, 2010). France-Germany also shared the concern that the (forced) departure of one member state might create 'contagion' effects and ultimately lead to the collapse of EMU.

The working and impact of embedded bilateralism first became visible in May 2010 when national leaders and finance ministers from the Eurozone countries, following a Franco-German proposal, agreed to bilateral loans for Greece and the establishment of the European Financial Stability Facility (EFSF), an intergovernmental rescue mechanism worth €440 billion (Degner & Leuffen, 2018, pp. 95–96).

Ways of leadership and stabilization

During the following two years, the Eurozone crisis produced all three ways of Franco-German leadership introduced above. First, in terms of agenda-setting, Sarkozy and Merkel, after a bilateral meeting in Deauville on 18 October 2010, suggested a roadmap for EMU governance reform (Danish Government, 2010), therewith combining the ‘establishment of a robust crisis resolution framework’ including a respective amendment of the EU treaties with stricter rules for national expenditures via enhanced supranational oversight. These different but complementary priorities – the tightening of the EU’s fiscal framework together with more EU-level fiscal risk-sharing – would characterize the further Eurozone crisis management.

Second, the most prominent bilateral and subsequent EU-level compromise was the German approval of the European Stability Mechanism (ESM) – a permanent rescue mechanism replacing the temporary EFSF – in exchange for French support for the ‘fiscal compact’, which established more binding national spending rules. A permanent, EU-level financial ‘firewall’ had been a French priority from the onset. Germany, however, made the creation of the ESM conditional on closer supranational economic and fiscal coordination. The fact that both the ESM and the fiscal compact were formally adopted by national leaders on 2 March 2012 underscores the ‘compensation logic’ of EU-level compromises inspired by France and Germany (Degner & Leuffen, 2018, p. 97).

Third, France and Germany at times moved carrying out Eurozone governance reform within a subgroup of member states. Most notably, when the British government threatened to veto EU treaty reform, France–Germany realized the fiscal compact with 25 out of the 27 member states at the time on an intergovernmental basis (Krotz & Schramm, 2021, p. 48).

Summary and assessment

Some scholars stressed an asymmetry within the Franco-German duo and its impact on EU polity maintenance due to the two countries’ different exposure and capacities (Bulmer & Paterson, 2019, pp. 167–200). However, it is important to grasp that the German government, too, in the course of the Eurozone crisis, crossed several national ‘red lines’ in order to save the common currency and make EMU, and hence the entire EU polity, more

resilient. For instance, despite opposing economic beliefs and some resistance from national lawmakers, the German government via the ESM de facto approved European bailouts for deficient bank and states. And despite ‘moral hazard’ concerns, it conceded more financial risk-sharing in the form of a European banking union (Webber, 2019, pp. 65–86).

Most importantly, France-Germany backed the ECB and its President, Mario Draghi, after the latter had declared to buy, if necessary, unlimited government bonds to reduce interest rates and provide more fiscal space for member states facing insolvency. Arguably, bilateral support for Draghi (Deutsche Welle, 2012), together with national leaders’ commitment in summer 2012 ‘to do everything necessary’ for the stability of the Eurozone (European Council, 2012), preserved the common currency. Ultimately, EMU membership had actually increased (rather than decreased), with three more EU member states adopting the single currency in the course of the crisis; policy fields like banking supervision and regulation had been transferred from the national to the EU-level; and the EU’s supranational institutions – notably the ECB – had gained authority. The quest for EU polity stabilization thus triggered further European integration (Webber, 2019, p. 56). France and Germany, either explicitly via the creation of the ESM, or more implicitly through their backing of the ECB, were essential for this crisis outcome. Since they did not develop a joint strategic objective for an overall EMU framework, Franco-German leadership reflected complementary preferences and took the form of bilateral package deals (see also Degner & Leuffen, 2018; Schild, 2013).

The migration crisis

An unprecedented number of asylum seekers coming to Europe in early 2015 put enormous pressures on the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) and the Schengen regime of borderless travel. The free movement of people is one of the most visible public goods generated by the European integration process; citizens regularly rank it as the EU’s most popular policy. CEAS and Schengen are linked, in that the free movement of people relies on the effective control of the EU’s external borders and an internal management of asylum applications.

Demand for leadership and stabilization

In May 2015, the European Commission proposed an ‘Agenda on Migration’ with several short- and longer-term measures (European Commission, 2015). Among the immediate measures, noting ‘that the capacity of local reception and processing facilities is already stretched thin’, the Commission suggested an EU internal relocation of recognized refugees, calling upon member states ‘to ensure a fair and balanced participation [...] to this common effort’ based

on a fixed redistribution key. In addition, ‘frontline’ member states at the EU’s Southeastern external borders – the point of entry of most asylum seekers – called for common EU action and more responsibility-sharing.

At the same time, despite the record overall numbers of asylum seekers, individual member states were very differently affected by migratory pressures. While ‘frontline’ countries, primarily Greece and Italy, and top ‘destination’ countries like Germany, Sweden, and Austria witnessed high and rising numbers of asylum applications, most ‘transit’ or ‘bystander’ countries were hardly affected at all and largely satisfied with the status quo (Biermann et al., 2019). In 2015 and 2016, about 80 percent of all EU asylum applications were launched in only six member states. Thus, in view of the actor constellation and distribution of migratory pressures, there was little demand for any leadership promoting the more equal distribution of asylum seekers.

Supply of leadership and stabilization

As large countries that are traditionally among the top recipients of asylum applications in Europe, France and Germany were again in a particularly prominent position (Trauner, 2016, p. 315). Both are founders and key beneficiaries of the Schengen regime and have a strong interest in preserving the free movement of people. Moreover, in times of lower migratory pressures, France and Germany profited from the ‘Dublin’ rules stipulating that asylum seekers launch their applications in the EU country of their first entry and thus usually in member states at the EU’s external borders. Due to an interest for a return to more ‘normal’ times and the individual gains involved in a proper functioning of the system, Hypothesis 2 predicts at least some attempt for Franco-German leadership. At the same time, however, the two countries were affected unevenly by the numbers of arriving asylum seekers: while 53.5 percent of all asylum applications in the EU in 2015 and 2016 were launched in these two countries, Germany alone accounted for 47 percent (European Parliament, [without year](#)).

Temporarily suspending the Dublin rules, in late August 2015 the German government allowed Syrian war refugees arriving from Hungary to apply for asylum in Germany, referring to a humanitarian emergency. However, only a few other member states heeded Germany’s call to take in some of these refugees (interviews #1, #2; see also Webber, 2019, p. 155). When the number of asylum seekers further increased, while an EU-level agreement on more responsibility-sharing remained absent, several member states proceeded to national measures such as border closures, a ‘waving through’ approach, and the tightening of national asylum laws (Trauner, 2016). Germany, on 13 September, was the first Schengen country to introduce controls at its border with Austria. In a chain reaction, seven other member states followed. After the November terror attacks in Paris, France also tightened its border

controls (and would, like Germany, repeatedly prolong its exemption from the Schengen *acquis*). By late 2015, thus, France and Germany themselves risked undermining the public good of borderless travel.

Ways of leadership and stabilization

France and Germany at times sought to enforce EU-level measures. The most prominent example is the mandatory relocation mechanism. Proposed by the Commission, on 22 September 2015 the Council of the EU – via qualified majority and against the votes of four (Eastern European) member states – initiated a two-year plan to relocate 160,000 asylum-seekers across the EU (Council of the EU, 2015). According to policymakers and civil servants involved, given the general resistance of many member states, this decision was remarkable and an expression of EU compromise- and consensus-building inspired by France and Germany (interview #3). However, most member states did not (fully) implement the quota, refusing to take in their allocated share of refugees. The strongest opposition came from the Hungarian Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán, who declared the migratory pressures a ‘German problem’ and considered the case neither a crisis nor a common issue requiring a European response (BBC, 2015).

To manage, and ultimately reduce, the number of asylum seekers coming to Europe, member states opted for agreements with transitory ‘third’ countries. Germany, in a partial departure from its previous attempt to find an EU-internal solution, was the driving actor behind the EU-Turkey statement from March 2016. The conclusion of the agreement underlined Germany’s still important role and impact on EU crisis management. At the same time, France was remarkably absent from these negotiations, illustrating the lack of bilateral coordination and preparation of EU-level action (Webber, 2019, pp. 166–170). Moreover, other member states, too, promoted successful agenda-setting and coalition-building. Austria, for instance, with a group of other countries, closed the Western Balkan route, one of the main migration paths. Such agreements, together with national measures like the tightening of asylum laws, drastically reduced the arrivals.

The migration crisis occasionally triggered further attempts for Franco-German leadership and agenda-setting, such as the appeal by the two countries’ foreign ministers for a reform of the CEAS and the Dublin rules to better cope ‘with exceptional circumstances’ via more ‘burden sharing among all member states [but if necessary] with a group of like-minded partners’ (Ayrault & Steinmeier, 2016). Such proposals for coalition-building, however, were not given much political substance or followed by concrete measures. An important reason for the limited Franco-German impact on EU polity stabilization and development in the migration crisis was that the two countries themselves did not develop a joint understanding for

effective crisis resolution. Germany, for instance, was a strong advocate of a permanent and automatic relocation mechanism. France, however, while officially backing the German approach, was less supportive. Shortly after the September decision, Prime Minister Manuel Valls suggested that the agreed relocation to remain an exception and declared Merkel's migration policy to have failed. He also opposed turning the relocation mechanism into a permanent instrument (Webber, 2019, p. 165).

Summary and assessment

Franco-German leadership and impact during the migration crisis was weak and at times entirely absent. In addition to the lack of bilateral objectives for how to tackle the crisis, the second important factor was the limited demand for Franco-German crisis management. Since most other member states were largely satisfied with the status quo and/or had available national options, they showed little interest in burden-sharing, at least when it came to the relocation of refugees.

In the end, several member states – including France and Germany – had introduced national border controls to cope with the migratory pressures, while others ignored or rejected the ruling by the Court of Justice of the EU on the legality of the relocation mechanism and further proposals by the Commission for policy reform. With respect to the EU polity, the migration crisis marked an element of disintegration and de-stabilization in that it led to a (partial) re-nationalization of asylum and border policies and a weakening of the authority of supranational EU institutions (Webber, 2019, pp. 170–171).

The Covid-19 crisis

The Covid-19 pandemic constituted a 'comprehensive' crisis for the EU in that it concerned all three key policy regimes at the same time: first, rising national debt levels and diverging interest rates threatened the stability of the Eurozone. Second, border closures (further) restricted the free movement of people inside the Schengen area. Third, and most importantly, interruptions of economic supply chains and different national fiscal capacities to absorb the economic shock risked undermining fair competition inside the single market as another key public good of European integration.

Demand for leadership and stabilization

To address and mitigate the most immediate economic shocks, the EU's supranational institutions acted quickly. In March 2020, the European Commission suspended national deficit rules and state-aid provisions. Soon after, the ECB decided to buy (additional) government bonds to give

member states more fiscal space. Of particular concern was Italy, Europe's first corona hotspot and third largest economy, which was facing sharply rising state expenditures and interest rates. It was widely assumed that Italy's debt levels were too high for the other member states to bail out if it were to lose access to the financial markets. In turn, if Italy was forced to leave the Eurozone, unknown economic and political damage for the EU and its single market might follow.

Due to the massive economic downturn, the main focus of EU crisis management concerned the fiscal dimension of the pandemic. As admitted by Commission President Von der Leyen (2020), and despite the actions already taken by supranational actors, only the member states could provide decisive fiscal measures and mobilize large resources. Moreover, policymakers highlighted the threat to the EU polity if member states were unable to agree on common measures. In view of such high status quo costs and mutual vulnerabilities, demand for political leadership was high. France and Germany, which together had available the largest financial resources in the EU, were in a prominent position. Moreover, with intergovernmental negotiations in a deadlock, and France and Germany each representing supposedly opposite camps of member states, the demand and potential for bilateral leadership increased, giving further support to Hypothesis 1. On 25 March 2020, France, together with eight other member states, had signed a letter to the European Council President calling for the issuance of joint European debt (Euractiv, 2020). Germany, like other 'Northern' member states, at first opposed the creation of common debt and insisted on the use of existing instruments.

Supply of leadership and stabilization

Due to the fairly symmetric shock of the crisis and the record decline in economic activity, France and Germany, in accordance with Hypothesis 2, had an interest in supplying leadership. For both, the potential gains from leading increasingly outweighed the costs of inaction. On the one hand, France's recession was even larger and its fiscal capacities smaller than Germany's. On the other hand, however, Germany, too, experienced a record decline in economic output. According to German policymakers and business representatives, local lockdowns in Northern Italy, for instance, together with the interruption of supply chains, hampered economic activity in Germany (interviews #10, #18).

A first result of Franco-German activity became visible on 9 April, when the Eurogroup agreed on a Covid-19 recovery package worth €540 billion comprising loans and guarantees for enterprises, employees, and health-related state expenditures. According to both insiders and close observers, the French and German Finance Ministers, Bruno Le Maire and Olaf Scholz, had been essential for bridging differences between member states (interviews #12, #14).

Moreover, press reports revealed how President Macron and Chancellor Merkel themselves directly intervened in the Eurogroup negotiations, urging hesitant national leaders via phone to endorse the package (Chazan et al., 2020).

Ways of leadership and stabilization

Following intensified bilateral consultations, France and Germany on 18 May presented a joint initiative for an EU recovery plan (France Diplomacy, 2020). According to the proposal, the Commission would raise, backed by member-state guarantees, €500 billion in the financial markets and allocate the money in the form of grants to the European regions hit hardest by the pandemic. This proposal was a bilateral compromise in that Germany accepted the notion of EU debt and direct financial transfers (hence grants), while France subscribed to a temporary instrument as part of the EU budget with economic conditions and supranational oversight attached. The Franco-German initiative set the agenda for the following Commission proposal on 'Next Generation EU' and, on 17–21 July, agreement among all 27 member states on an EU recovery plan (Krotz & Schramm, 2022).

In the run-up to the decisive European Council, France and Germany definitively left their camps of supposedly like-minded member states to promote their proposal and take a mediating position. Both Macron and Merkel met for bilateral pre-consultations with national leaders whom they considered crucial for EU-level consensus. Due to different national priorities and the need for a unanimous decision, the European Council in mid-July agreed upon several concessions to individual camps of member states, such as the Southern former 'corona bonds' camp, the Northern 'frugals', and Hungary and Poland, who had opposed a conditionality clause attached to the financial package. The overall size and governance of NGEU, however, remained (European Council, 2020).

Next to agenda-setting and consensus-building, the Covid-19 pandemic brought forth the third main way of Franco-German leadership, namely coalition-building and (the threat of) differentiated integration among a subgroup of member states. During autumn 2020, the European Parliament and the Council of the EU as the EU's two legislators had transferred the July European Council conclusions into legal acts, thereby tightening again the conditionality clause. When Hungary and Poland in late November once more threatened to veto the recovery package, France and Germany suggested implementing NGEU, if necessary, with 25 member states only (Reuters, 2020). In the end, Hungary and Poland refrained from putting a veto, and the European Council finally endorsed NGEU.

Summary and assessment

Starting from a strategic goal, namely, common economic recovery, France and Germany had paved the way for a strong European response to the

Covid-19 pandemic. Following the logic and imperative of their embedded bilateralism, both countries – despite national preferences actually closer to other member states – left their camp of like-minded actors to enable an EU-level compromise. The considerable, although somewhat abstract demand for common measures in response to the pandemic facilitated the recovery plan inspired by France-Germany.

Moreover, the bilateral initiative for an EU recovery fund shows that France and Germany, to a certain extent, can stimulate demand among actors, leading other formerly reluctant member states to join their proposal. With respect to the EU polity, the Covid-19 crisis not only ‘maintained’ political cohesion but also triggered vertical and sectoral integration in that the Commission got further competences and the new ‘European’ debt will have to be repaid together (Schramm et al., 2022).

Conclusions

In each of the three crises examined, France and Germany played an important and at times decisive part in crisis management and resolution and in the provision or maintenance of European public goods. Primarily, this has been because of their prominent joint position. Together, France and Germany account for about half of member states’ economic output and half of the asylum applications launched in the EU. Due to their embedded bilateralism and dense net of political, diplomatic and administrative ties, along with their resources and capacities, France and Germany exercised at least some forms of bilateral leadership in every crisis. Importantly, this applies to the entire period of investigation, irrespective of changes in domestic politics and the composition of the national government.

In accordance with Hypothesis 1, the emergence and potential impact of Franco-German leadership largely depend on the *demand* for it on the part of other member states. To some extent, France and Germany – due to their ‘critical mass’ – can stimulate (further) demand, or at least acceptance, for leadership. With their joint effort for a Covid-19 recovery plan, for instance, both countries signaled the potential for some form of EU debt instrument, appealing to even formerly reluctant member states. If, however, most member states consider status quo costs to be low due to asymmetric interdependence or uneven vulnerabilities, and if they have available national options more attractive than pan-Union action – as in the migration crisis – Franco-German influence fades. This is all the more likely if France and Germany themselves do not agree on a strategic goal for crisis resolution.

Congruent with Hypothesis 2, the case studies show that France and Germany are ready to *supply* leadership if both realize high status quo costs and consider the benefits and potential gains from leading to exceed its costs. Importantly, this tends to be the case for France-Germany more

often than for any other (group of) member states. Yet, when one partner is more affected by a crisis than the other, bilateral leadership becomes more challenging, and its impact tends to be asymmetrical. This was the case in the Eurozone crisis, where Germany often slowly and implicitly endorsed measures to save the common currency, and in the migration crisis, where France only reluctantly backed bilateral initiatives like the relocation mechanism for refugees. In sum, however, Franco-German positions and initiatives have proven crucial for stabilizing the EU polity in moments of deep crisis.

Furthermore, the article has theorized and demonstrated different ways of Franco-German leadership, including agenda-setting, consensus- and compromise-building, and coalition-building. France and Germany's differing ability and willingness to deploy these instruments explain their uneven leadership record in the EU's poly-crisis. The relative success (or failure) of Franco-German leadership and stabilization, in turn, to a large extent account for the varying crisis outcomes and their implications for EU polity stabilization and development. [Table 1](#) below summarizes the main findings from the case studies.

At the same time, the limits of Franco-German leadership and impact on EU crisis management have become visible. First, one form of leadership is scarcely enough if it is not followed by and embedded into more comprehensive measures. The sharply criticized Franco-German declaration of Deauville from October 2010, which sought to impose a roadmap for EMU governance reform on other member states and EU actors, is a case in point (Chang, 2013). Second, bilateral attempts at leadership must be followed by concrete measures on the part of France-Germany themselves and must be open to involve other member states. Occasional proposals to reform the CEAS and Schengen regime, which ultimately proved unsuccessful, demonstrate this point.

Table 1. Presence/absence of demand and supply factors; ways of Franco-German leadership; and consequences for EU polity development in three recent EU crises.

	Demand	Supply	Ways of bilateral leadership	Development of EU polity
Eurozone crisis	++	++	Agenda-setting; consensus-building (additive logic); coalition-building	Stabilization and further integration (number of member states and EU policy fields; supranational competences)
Migration crisis	o	+	Agenda-setting also via Commission and other member states; often unsuccessful consensus-building; no coalition-building	De-stabilization and partial disintegration (re-nationalization of policies; undermining of supranational actors and procedures)
Covid-19 crisis	++	++	Agenda-setting; consensus-building (convergent logic); (threat of) coalition-building	Stabilization and further integration (number of EU policy fields; supranational competences)

Explanation: ++ symbolizes 'strongly present'; + stands for 'present'; o represents 'absent'.

By way of concluding, we briefly elaborate on two points: what holds Franco-German bilateralism together? And how does Franco-German bilateralism relate to other recent EU crises? One part of the answer to the first question is that especially in times of EU crisis, there often is no credible alternative to this couple among member states (Krotz & Schild, 2018). This also includes the EU's supranational actors, which usually lack autonomous resources and decision-making competences. Moreover, Franco-German bilateralism and leadership draw on a tight set of intergovernmental links and channels, 'para-public' societal underpinnings, and institutionalized purpose that sets them apart from other networks of member-state cooperation (Krotz, 2002, 2007, 2010; Krotz & Schild, 2013, chapters 2–4).

Indeed, their common history of warfare, the success story of the European integration project, and their special bilateral relationship and its role for the EU polity's stability and development again and again remind decision-makers on both sides that without Franco-German initiatives and compromises, the EU risks stalling or even disintegration. This is the institutional, historic, and symbolic grounding of Franco-German bilateralism that underpins and complements the more rationalist-driven explanation in terms of crisis affectedness and status quo and/or vulnerabilities costs that we expound in this article.

Second, how do Brexit and Russia's war in Ukraine relate to our findings? At first glance, the British decision to withdraw from membership posed the most immediate threat to the EU polity since it is a clear expression of (horizontal) European disintegration. On the other hand, however, as suggested above, the Brexit case is different from other EU crises in that the legal procedures and institutional competences had been predefined. Article 50 of the Treaty on European Union stipulates that, based on the priorities and guidelines agreed upon by the European Council, the Commission conducts the detailed negotiations with the exiting government. Moreover, the actor constellation and distributional implications of the Brexit crisis were rather clear, with the departing country opposing all remaining member states (Schimmelfennig, 2018). Thus, France and Germany, like other member states, were less visible during Brexit than in the other crises. At the same time, scholars still note that Franco-German unity and their rejection of separate negotiations with the British government were necessary to establish and keep the cohesion of the EU-27 (Webber, 2019, pp. 177–206).

Russia's war against Ukraine, with its implications for European security and energy, seems to fit the arguments developed in this study. Due to their large political and military resources, as well as traditionally close ties to Russia, France and Germany again occupy a prominent position. Demands for European security efforts have seen their biggest push in decades. Germany's announcement of a 'Zeitenwende' and greater defense spending, together with France's efforts for more autonomous European

sovereignty and defense assets, indicate bilateral willingness to assume burdens and drive the EU polity forward. Under the recent French EU Council Presidency in the first half of 2022, member states endorsed the Strategic Compass and, for the first time, financed the delivery of weapons into a war zone.

However, the concrete demand for bilateral leadership and the (possible) forms of its supply are too early to tell. Several Central and Eastern European member states raised concerns about Franco-German hesitation and ambiguity in their relations with Russia. Moreover, in this policy field, more than in any other covered in this study, the role of 'external' actors – not least the presence, resources, and actions of the United States and NATO – matters. These actors and resources complement, or even substitute for, the role of France-Germany in Europe's Union in this abysmal war reaching far beyond the EU and its polity.

Notes

1. A public or collective good is 'any good that cannot be withheld from any member of a specific group once it is supplied to one member of that group' (Frohlich et al., 1971, p. 3; see also Olson, 1965, p. 14). Two characteristics, in particular, are associated with public goods: first, they are costly to supply. Second, they are difficult to supply other than via coercion or outside intervention. As a result, groups, including multinational organizations, often fail to supply (large amounts of) public goods. This is where and why political leadership or 'entrepreneurship' matter (see Frohlich et al., 1971, pp. 3–11; Olson, 1965, pp. 5–52).
2. Similarly, Deutsch and colleagues (1957, chapter 2) find that the involvement of 'core' political units, whether regions or states, pursuing 'integrative behavior', is an important background condition for regional integration, no matter whether – as they have it – 'pluralistic' or 'amalgamated' or mixed forms, such as the European Union.
3. In the spirit of Karl Deutsch and colleagues' (1957, chapters 2–3) concept of 'background conditions', in order for intergovernmental dynamics to produce results – whether bilateral, multilateral, or both – domestic politics must provide minimally permissive or conducive, rather than obstructive or prohibitive, political contexts. On the multifaceted interlinking or intertwining of intergovernmental affairs and domestic politics, see, for example, Putnam (1988); Evans et al. (1993); Gourevitch (2002); Krotz (2011, chapter 2); and Schultz (2013).
4. For a long-term view on France-Germany in Europe, see Krotz (2014).
5. As is well established in the literature, there must be a 'surplus' for potential leaders: leaders assume such a role and make investments, such as the provision of public goods, only if they themselves (expect to) benefit from it (Frohlich et al., 1971, pp. 6–7; Olson, 1965, pp. 33–34; Young, 1991).
6. In this respect, they differ from 'Brexit', which equally affected the EU polity. Brexit was less of a crisis for the EU in this article's understanding, since clear legal provisions and institutional competences existed for how to handle the (voluntary) departure of a member state. We will briefly discuss the implications of Brexit for EU polity maintenance and Franco-German leadership in the conclusions.

7. Some recent analyses found instances of (successful) supranational leadership during EU crises. Deters and Zardo (2022), for instance, scrutinize how the EU, in the form of the European Commission, centralized its vaccine provisioning. Similarly, Schuette (2021) analyzes EU-27 unity during the Commission's Task Force 50 negotiations with the departing British government. In accordance with assumptions put forward in this study, both articles note that the rise and impact of supranational leadership depended on member-state support for a common approach and sufficient 'national backing' (Deters & Zardo, 2022, p. 2). Moreover, as noted above, there was large consensus among the 27 member-state governments for the Commission to conduct the detailed negotiations with the British government because of the clear constellation of interests between EU 'ins' and 'outs'. In this respect, Brexit was indeed 'an exceptional case' (Schuette, 2021, p. 1155).

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- #1. Senior civil servant from the General Secretariat of the Council of the EU. Brussels, March 2018.
- #2. Civil servant working at the Permanent Representation of Austria to the EU. Brussels, March 2018.
- #3. Civil servant working at the Permanent Representation of Slovakia to the EU. Brussels, March 2018.
- #7. Senior official from the Elysée. Via Microsoft Teams, November 2020.
- #10. Representative of German Industry. By phone, November 2020.
- #12. Senior official from the German Finance Ministry. By phone, November 2020.
- #14. Official from the French Finance Ministry. By phone, December 2020.
- #16. Senior official from German Federal Government. By phone, January 2021.
- #18. Member of the German federal parliament. Via Zoom, January 2021.