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Merz' European Policy-making

The End of the "German Vote"?

Jeanette SÜß

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Executive summary

Friedrich Merz's European ambition is to turn Germany, long seen as hesitant into a leading actor within the European Union (EU). To that end, he has pledged to end the "German vote," a phenomenon that epitomizes the paradox of a country both indispensable and frequently absent from European decisions. Germany's indecision, often rooted in internal coalition division, has translated in Brussels into delays, significant abstentions, and a gradual erosion of trust among its partners. Worsened in recent years, this uncertainty has weakened Germany's credibility and contributed to paralysis in EU decision-making. To address this, Merz's government has introduced new mechanisms in Berlin designed to increase coherence in Germany's European policy coordination.

Substantively, Friedrich Merz's European agenda rests on two closely linked pillars: European sovereignty and competitiveness. His government promotes deregulation of administrative burdens and an industrial strategy focused on innovation, energy, and the single market, aiming to prevent the EU from falling behind the United States and China.

In practice, however, the first months of the CDU/CSU-SPD government have shown that the promise to end the "German vote" still faces partisan and procedural tensions. These continue to produce tactical abstentions, attempts to bypass coordination channels, and rivalries between ministries.

On the European stage, Merz relies on the Franco-German partnership, the Weimar Triangle, and other small-group formats. His more intergovernmental approach fuels both expectations for clearer German leadership and concerns among member states wary of an overly assertive "Germany-first" approach. Yet the window of opportunity to shape a lasting European agenda, particularly with France, remains narrow and uncertain as 2027 approaches.

Résumé

L'ambition européenne de Friedrich Merz est de faire de l'Allemagne, souvent perçue comme hésitante, un acteur de premier plan de l'Union européenne. À cette fin, le chancelier allemand a annoncé vouloir mettre un terme au « German vote ». Celui-ci incarne le paradoxe d'une Allemagne à la fois indispensable et fréquemment absente dans la décision européenne. L'indécision allemande, souvent le reflet de dissensions internes, se traduit à Bruxelles par des blocages, des abstentions lourdes de conséquences et une érosion de la confiance de ses partenaires. Ce phénomène, aggravé ces dernières années, a entamé la crédibilité de l'Allemagne, conduisant à une paralysie décisionnelle à Bruxelles. Pour remédier à cette situation, Friedrich Merz et son gouvernement ont mis en place de nouveaux dispositifs afin de renforcer la cohérence de la politique européenne de l'Allemagne.

Sur le fond, le chancelier articule sa politique européenne autour de deux grands axes thématiques étroitement liés : la souveraineté et le regain de compétitivité européenne. Le gouvernement Merz pousse à une adaptation et à un allègement ciblé des contraintes réglementaires, ainsi qu'à un agenda industriel centré sur l'innovation, l'énergie et le marché intérieur, afin d'éviter un décrochage vis-à-vis des États-Unis et de la Chine.

Dans la pratique, malgré cette volonté, les premiers mois du gouvernement CDU/CSU-SPD ont montré que la promesse de mettre fin au « German vote » se heurte à des tensions partisanes et procédurales qui produisent encore abstentions tactiques, contournement des circuits de coordination et rivalités entre ministères.

Sur la scène européenne, Friedrich Merz mise sur le franco-allemand, le triangle de Weimar et des formats mini-latéraux. Sa méthode plus intergouvernementale nourrit à la fois l'attente d'un leadership allemand plus clair et la méfiance d'États qui redoutent l'approche d'une Allemagne trop assertive selon l'idée « Germany first ». Or, la fenêtre d'opportunité pour structurer un agenda européen durable – en particulier avec Paris – reste étroite et incertaine à l'horizon 2027.

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The "German Vote": between eroded credibility and European paralysis

When Frederich Merz was elected on May 6, 2025, the new German Chancellor promised that Germany would return to the European and international stage. As a key measure of Germany's comeback, he has announced his intention to put an end to the "German vote": i.e., the inability to take a position in Brussels, particularly in the Council of Ministers, due to a lack of inter-ministerial agreement.[1] Merz is indeed responsible for maintaining his coalition with the Social Democrats (SPD), who do not always share the political position of the Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) on European affairs.

After years of political caution under Angela Merkel and then Olaf Scholz, the new Chancellor wants to revive Germany's traditional role in European politics as a key player and driving force. He intends to re-engage his party in the European integration project, in the spirit of the ambitions of former Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his confidant Wolfgang Schäuble, the architects of the institutional reforms that shaped the architecture of the European Union (EU).[2] Although Angela Merkel had established herself as a manager of multiple crises (the euro, immigration, and COVID-19), she was unable to give European politics new impetus. Her lack of response to Emmanuel Macron's "initiative for Europe" in his 2017 Sorbonne speech did not go unnoticed in France.[3] Back in 2017, the term "capacity to act" (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) was used more often than sovereignty.[4]

Angela Merkel's European leadership performance is seen as partially successful even when Germany held the presidency of the Council of the EU (which brings together the various ministerial formations) in 2020. Despite the need to adapt the initial program to the management of the Covid-19 crisis, Germany played a decisive role in the negotiation and adoption of the

1. "CDU/CSU-Gruppe gratuliert Friedrich Merz zur Wahl zum Bundeskanzler" [CDU/CSU Group congratulates Friedrich Merz on his election as Federal Chancellor], CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the European Parliament, May 6, 2025, available at: www.cducsu.eu.
2. P. Maurice, "Couple franco-allemand : que pouvons-nous attendre de Friedrich Merz ?", Telos, February 26, 2025, available at: www.telos-eu.com.
3. "Initiative pour l'Europe – Discours d'Emmanuel Macron pour une Europe souveraine, unie, démocratique," Élysée, September 26, 2017, available at: www.elysee.fr.
4. C. Demesmay, "Captain in the Storm: Challenges and Opportunities for the German EU Council Presidency", *Notes du Cerfa*, No. 153, Ifri, June 2020, p. 13, available at: www.ifri.org.

NextGenerationEU recovery instrument, which was decided upon as a joint Franco-German initiative in spring 2020 and formally adopted under the German presidency.[5] This agreement was a major achievement for the German presidency, which began in July 2020, even though Angela Merkel did not seek to make it part of a broader effort to strengthen European integration in the long term.[6]

For his part, Olaf Scholz led a government from 2021 to 2025 that showed greater European ambitions than Angela Merkel's Grand Coalition, which preceded it. These ambitions were championed in particular by the Greens and the Liberal Democrats (FDP), who had pushed for a German response to Emmanuel Macron's Sorbonne speech in the coalition agreement.[7] However, such ambition was hampered by a lack of leadership by Olaf Scholz, leaving a political vacuum in the EU that France alone was unable to fill. Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine and the resulting energy crisis have both exposed and reinforced these European difficulties, exacerbating the German government's hesitations and complicating the search for shared responses. The government's hesitations have resulted in both slowness and great caution regarding deliveries of heavy weapons to Ukraine, giving the impression of a persistent gap between the rhetoric of change and actual concrete decisions. They also emerged in the management of the energy crisis, marked by internal disputes over nuclear power, the timetable for decoupling from Russia, and the implementation of consumer protection measures, which often placed Berlin in a position of reacting rather than anticipating change.

This lack of German leadership at the European level, brought to light and accentuated by successive crises, served as the backdrop for Friedrich Merz's arrival at the Chancellery. Although he had not previously held any government office, one of his first positions was as a Member of the European Parliament in the early 1990s. This political experience gives him a certain credibility as an advocate for the European cause, which he places at the heart of his foreign policy, in line with his public image as a

5. U. Krotz and L. Schramm, "Embedded Bilateralism, Integration Theory, and European Crisis Politics: France, Germany, and the Birth of the EU Coronavirus Recovery Fund", *Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2021, pp. 526-544.

6. Beyond NextGenerationEU, Berlin helped to finalize the package comprising the 2021-2027 Multiannual Financial Framework, the decision on own resources, and on reaching an agreement in principle on the EU's new climate target for 2030, as well as finalizing the post-Brexit Trade and Cooperation Agreement. The German presidency also enabled progress to be made on the Council's work on digitalization, the European Health Union, defense cooperation, and certain aspects of migration and asylum policy, even if this did not have the same symbolic impact as the recovery fund. See K. Böttgera and M. Jopp, "Die deutsche EU-Ratspräsidentschaft 2020: selektive Föderalisierung des Integrationsprozesses" [The German EU Presidency in 2020: selective federalization of the integration process], *Integration*, No. 1/2021, pp. 3-23.

7. "Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD" [Coalition Agreement], CDU/CSU, SPD, p. 138, available at: www.koalitionsvertrag2025.de.

"Chancellor of Foreign Affairs" (*Außenkanzler*).[8] According to Merz, a strong Germany remains essential to tackle the current challenges facing the EU: economic recovery after years of stagnation and international turmoil; developing the EU's "capacity to act" (*Handlungsfähigkeit*) in the face of geopolitical upheaval and American disengagement from international institutions; and developing a more ambitious industrial and defense policy. The multiple crises that the EU has experienced since 2008 have demonstrated the importance of coordination between national and European policy. If Germany is weakened economically and politically, the entire Union suffers the consequences. Germany needs to have a "European mindset" and think about placing its decisions in a truly European perspective when it makes an important political decision, such as Merz's "change of era" (*Zeitenwende*) speech or the shift in Germany's migration policy.[9] Given its economic weight and geopolitical role in the world, European partners expect German leadership to address concrete issues such as trade policy towards the United States and China, the decline in transatlantic ties, and the question of the EU's Multiannual Financial Framework. Friedrich Merz wants to embody this role.[10]

But the Chancellor must also ensure that European partners do not perceive him as advocating a "Germany first" approach by pursuing only its own interests.[11] From this point of view, Friedrich Merz is banking on the revival of the Franco-German tandem, the Weimar Triangle, and other intergovernmental formats such as Weimar+ (France, Germany, Poland, Italy and Spain) and the E3 (France, Germany and the United Kingdom). With these various coalitions, Merz is seeking to forge a more assertive European security and defense policy, particularly concerning European support for Ukraine, but also to revive the EU's competitiveness. This topic is also central to the new Franco-German agenda. In a joint Op-Ed published in *Le Figaro* on the day the German Chancellor took office, the two heads of state and government sent a strong signal about reviving the Franco-German engine with a focus on competitiveness.[12] And despite

8. "In 70 Tagen um die Welt: Wie schlägt sich der „Außenkanzler" Merz?" [Around the world in 70 days: How is "Foreign Chancellor" Merz doing?], *DGAP Morning Brief*, DGAP, July 17, 2025, available at: https://dgap.org/de.

9. Upon taking office, Merz also introduced a shift in immigration policy, marked by greater restrictions, controls, and deportations, while reaffirming that Germany remains a country of immigration. In concrete terms, the government is focusing on limiting "illegal immigration," tightening entry requirements, and imposing stricter rules on naturalization, with the scrapping of accelerated naturalization after three years and a tightening of criteria.

10. P. Maurice, "Un 'leadership allemand plus fort' dans l'UE ?", *in* T. de Montbrial and D. David (eds.), *Ramses 2026: Un nouvel échiquier*, Paris: Dunod/Ifri, 2025, pp. 250-253.

11. J. Cliffe and J. Puglierin, "The Merz Doctrine: What a CDU-led Government Would Mean for German Foreign Policy", ECFR, December 18, 2024, available at: https://ecfr.eu.

12. E. Macron and F. Merz, "Il faut remettre à plat les relations franco-allemandes pour l'Europe", *Le Figaro*, May 7, 2025, available at: www.lefigaro.fr; E. Macron and F. Merz, "Einen diktierten Frieden werden wir niemals akzeptieren" [We will never accept a dictated peace], *Die Welt*, May 7, 2025, available at: www.welt.de.

political instability in France, the joint roadmap adopted in Toulon at the Franco-German Council of Ministers (CMFA) on August 29, 2025, seeks to put bilateral relations back on track while placing them in a broader European context.[13] This use of intergovernmental formats[14] reflects a desire to steer European policy more closely from the Chancellery, to use the European Council (which brings together heads of state and government) more strategically, and to assert itself more strongly *vis-à-vis* the European Commission, which is perceived by some in the CDU as acting predominantly within the EU.[15] These "mini-lateral" formats could become privileged spaces where bridges between North and South, East and West can be built, offering a more flexible framework for formulating, testing, and reconciling interests before bringing them to the level of the Union as a whole.[16]

However, this desire to present a clearer and more assertive image on the European stage contrasts with Merz's weak political base at the national level. The German Chancellor wants to make people forget the false start to his inauguration on May 6, 2025, when he failed to obtain an absolute majority of votes in the Bundestag in the first round of voting to become Chancellor. This incident was a first in recent German political history and has led to public skepticism and a loss of confidence among his electorate.[17] This feeling is reinforced by the perception that certain election promises have been broken, notably that of implementing the exemption mechanism for Germany's "debt brake" on public spending. It remains to be seen to what extent Friedrich Merz's commitments and actions will contribute to improving his image among the German population. However, restoring Germany's credibility in EU affairs among its European partners seems to be his priority for the time being. Under previous governments, the lack of consistency in Germany's European policy-making not only undermined its credibility at the European level but also had repercussions on its European partners, who were often waiting and eager to follow Germany's position.[18]

13. "Conseil des ministres franco-allemand à Toulon", Élysée, August 29, 2025, available at: www.elysee.fr.
14. J. Plottka, "A New German EU Policy: Merz's Intergovernmentalism or von der Leyen's Supranationalization?", Institute for European Politics, April 1, 2025, available at: https://iep-berlin.de.
15. Interviews conducted with parliamentary staff and civil servants in ministries run by the CDU.
16. L. Aggestam and A. Hyde-Price, "Germany's Role in Europe: Great Expectations", *European Policy Analysis*, Sieps, November 2025, p. 13, available at: https://sieps.se.
17. S. Garbe, F. Gathmann et al., "Als es zum Ernstfall kommt, gibt es keinen Plan" [When an emergency occurs, there is no plan], *Der Spiegel*, May 9, 2025, available at: www.spiegel.de.
18. A. Wimmel, "'The German Vote' im Rat der Europäischen Union" ["The German vote" in the Council of the European Union], *Integration*, No. 3/2024, p. 192-206.

"The German vote" under previous governments

Since the Merkel era and the first Grand Coalition between the CDU and SPD (2005-2009), the term "German vote" has been used in the media to highlight the German government's difficulties in coordinating on European issues. This hesitation or abstention, due to the coalition's complex internal structures, has been able to delay or complicate the adoption of European laws. Germany's European partners have expected it to assume a leadership role in view of its economic weight within the EU and its voting rights in the Council.[19] When Germany does not express a position, some other Member States are not always sure how to position themselves. If Germany changes its position, this could quickly lead other Member States to follow suit. For example, a diplomat from the German representation to the EU has noted that, especially for smaller countries such as Slovenia or Malta, instructions given for voting in Brussels are to "follow the German position – whatever that may be".[20]

Germany's significant weight in a qualified majority voting in the Council

To achieve a qualified majority in the Council of the European Union, a "double majority" must be obtained: i.e., 1) 55% of the votes of the Member States, which currently corresponds to 15 out of 27 States, and 2) states that must also represent at least 65% of the EU population. Only matters relating to foreign and security policy, financial and fiscal issues, and certain areas of judicial and domestic policy still require unanimous approval.[21] With 18.8% of the EU's population, Germany's weight within the Council is therefore decisive.[22]

Germany's weight has been strengthened since Brexit and since the reform of the Council's voting system following a transition phase in the implementation of the Treaty of Lisbon from 2009 to 2014. When Germany abstains from voting in the Council of the European Union, its abstention counts as a vote "against" a motion, due to the calculation of the qualified majority. This means that Germany may contribute to forming a blocking minority. To prevent a decision from being adopted, at least four Member States representing 35% of the EU population must vote against it. Without a doubt, abstention – except when it is a deliberate choice – reflects a lack of capacity for European action.

19. Germany's GDP accounts for around a quarter of the EU's total GDP, see Statista, "Produit intérieur brut (PIB) de l'Allemagne de 1970 à 2024", February 24, 2025, available at: https://fr.statista.com.
20. Interview with the author.
21. Pursuant to Article 16 of the Treaty on European Union.
22. A. Wimmel, "'The German Vote' im Rat der Europäischen Union", *op. cit.*

A leadership competition between the Chancellery and Germany's Federal Foreign Office

Thus, under the "black-yellow" coalition (CDU/CSU-FDP) between 2009 and 2013, there was a power struggle between the federal Chancellery, led by the CDU, and the foreign ministry, led by the FDP, over who should steer Germany's European policy-making in Brussels. The conflict centered on the position of the permanent representative in Brussels, Edmund Duckwitz, whom Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle had dismissed and replaced with his confidant Peter Tempel. For Guido Westerwelle, Duckwitz did not sufficiently represent the interests of the Foreign Office, as he had previously been appointed by Angela Merkel. This dispute temporarily undermined the coherence and effectiveness of Germany's position in the EU, due to a lack of clarity between the Chancellery and the Foreign Office on the line to be taken in the Council.[23]

The predominance of the principle of ministerial autonomy

During the second Grand Coalition between Christian Democrats and Social Democrats (2013-2017), the conflict over the continued use of glyphosate highlighted the lack of consistency within the government on European affairs. In fact, Agriculture Minister Christian Schmidt (CSU) supported extending the European authorization, while Environment Minister Barbara Hendricks (SPD) opposed it, prompting Germany to abstain for a long time. A few days before the deadline at the end of November 2017, Christian Schmidt voted alone in favor of authorizing a five-year extension without internal agreement, tipping the balance of the vote in the Agriculture and Fisheries Council as a whole. This move sparked heated controversy in Berlin and irritation in Brussels regarding the reliability of Germany's position within the EU.[24] A former French administrator of European affairs also sees this as "the biggest blow dealt by Germany to France", given that France had intended to vote in line with Germany and felt "betrayed" by the unilateral decision of the minister at the time.

23. C. B. Schiltz, "Berliner Kompetenzstreit lähmt deutsche EU-Politik" [Berlin dispute over jurisdiction paralyzes German EU policy], *Die Welt*, September 10, 2010, available at: www.welt.de; B. Hüttemann, "Das 'Schwarze Loch' der deutschen Europapolitik – Lobbyismus und europapolitische Koordinierung in Deutschland" [The 'black hole' of German European policy – lobbying and European policy coordination in Germany], in: D. Göler, A. Schmid, and L. Zech (eds.), *Europäische Integration. Beiträge zur Europaforschung aus multidimensionaler Analyseperspektive* [European integration: Contributions to European studies from a multidimensional analytical perspective], Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2015, pp. 175-195.

24. J. Pavy, "Le glyphosate prolongé, l'UE divisée", Euronews, November 28, 2017, available at: https://fr.euronews.com.

Governing as a trio – the dilemma of the "German vote" taken to extremes by the FDP

From Angela Merkel's last Grand Coalition to Olaf Scholz's "traffic light" coalition (2021-2024), the problems of coordinating European policy have become more acute. In 2021, Germany was governed by a coalition of three parties (SPD, Greens and FDP) for the first time since 1957 at the federal level. This new development exacerbated the difficulties of political coordination, making it more complicated to reach compromises. Furthermore, the Liberal Democrats of the FDP were probably never able to completely shake off their former position as an opposition party before the early end of the coalition in November 2024. In an increasingly fragmented German political system, each party in the government wanted to put forward its political demands with respect to its voters so as not to see its positions diluted in compromises with its coalition partners. This approach was taken to extremes by the FDP, which, as the smallest partner in the "traffic light" coalition, often felt relegated to the background. For electoral reasons, when regional, European or federal elections came up, the party slowed down or blocked decisions that had already been approved at the European level, through vetoes by some of its ministers. This attitude not only tarnished Germany's reputation in Brussels, but also reduced the federal government's political room for maneuver.

The episode of Germany blocking the ban on new cars with combustion engines from 2035 illustrates how much the procedural tactics of the "traffic light" coalition government damaged Germany's image and its European policy. In the fall of 2022, negotiations between the European Commission, the Council, and the Parliament on the ban on vehicles with combustion engines from 2035 were concluded. The formal adoption by Member States, scheduled for March 2023, was expected to be a mere formality. But the last-minute intervention by the FDP, led by German Transport Minister Volker Wissing, threw everything into question. The Liberal Party demanded that the European Commission guarantee the possibility of authorizing vehicles running solely on synthetic fuels (*e-fuels*) after 2035. Faced with the threat of German abstention and therefore a "German vote", the Swedish Presidency of the Council withdrew the item from the agenda. Without Germany, no qualified majority was possible, as Italy and Poland had also announced their opposition. The German government was divided on the issue, with the SPD and the Greens favoring the measure, while the FDP, which was opposed to it, ultimately chose to abstain. In Brussels, this position was seen as a sign of potential obstruction of the project.[25] After several days of uncertainty and intense political

25. S. Götze, G. Traufetter, and A. Haitsch, "Wegen FDP-Blockade – EU verschiebt Abstimmung über Verbrenner-Aus erneut" [Due to FDP blockade – EU postpones vote on combustion engine ban again], *Der Spiegel*, March 3, 2023, available at: www.spiegel.de.

pressure, a compromise was reached thanks to the direct intervention of Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who added the study of alternative technologies to the EU's decision, which ultimately enabled Germany to vote in favor of the text. This strategy by the FDP, which consisted of reopening compromises already negotiated at the European level, has been perceived as a "major factor of political instability" in recent years, calling into question Germany's reliability as a European partner, as summarized by a French diplomat in Brussels.

The adoption of the European Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) in March 2024, which imposes a duty of care on large companies with regard to human rights and the environment throughout their value chain, caused another major incident that has tarnished Germany's reputation in Brussels. This reversal by the FDP came very late in the negotiation process, after more than three years of discussions and despite the party's prior trilogue agreement.[26] On several occasions, votes in the Council of the EU had to be postponed. By refusing to approve the text, the FDP, which has traditionally been close to small and medium-sized enterprises, was thinking first and foremost of its own electoral base. Despite this "German vote," the law was adopted anyway, without Germany playing a predominant role in its design.[27]

There were only a few occasions when Chancellor Olaf Scholz exercised his prerogative to settle inter-ministerial disagreements within his coalition on European issues.[28] And when he did, as in September 2023, ahead of the adoption of the EU asylum and immigration pact, it was well into the negotiation process. While the Greens refused to support the crisis directive providing for accelerated asylum procedures at the EU's external borders, Olaf Scholz decided to use his prerogative to avoid another "German vote". It may well be asked what led him to exercise his prerogative in this specific context, but not in others. The issue of migration was one of the flagship projects of the "traffic light" coalition on the European stage, as Germany had been advocating for a compromise in Brussels for many months, and Olaf Scholz had publicly presented it as a historic step towards better organization and more effective limitation of migration flows. A last-minute German reversal, in the form of a "no" vote in the Council, and with the 2024

26. The trilogue is a stage in the European Union's legislative process, where representatives of the European Parliament, the Council of the EU, and the European Commission meet informally to negotiate and reach a compromise on proposed European legislation. The aim of the trilogue is to produce a joint text that is acceptable to both Parliament and the Council, with the Commission acting as mediator. This process speeds up the adoption of legislative texts when the two co-legislators (Parliament and Council) have different positions, see "Interinstitutional Negotiations", European Parliament, available at: www.europarl.europa.eu.

27. H. Kafsack, "EU verabschiedet Lieferkettengesetz" [EU adopts Due Diligence Law], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, March 15, 2024, available at: www.faz.net.

28. "Structure and responsibilities", Federal Government Press and Information Office, 2025, Federal Government, available at: www.bundesregierung.de. According to Article 65 of Germany's Basic Law, the Chancellor "determines the main lines of policy" and acts as an arbitrator in the event of conflict.

European elections approaching, would have seriously undermined the federal government's credibility in Europe, directly contradicting the line it had itself helped to shape. At the same time, the German executive was under growing domestic pressure to "regain control" of migration, facing an opposition led by the CDU, a rising AfD, and also parts of the FDP that were calling for a sharp tightening of migration policy and making this reform a litmus test of the coalition's ability to act.[29] After the decision, Olaf Scholz boasted in his general speech to the Bundestag that he had made progress on a major European policy issue. Friedrich Merz, then leader of the opposition, criticized him for failing to contain the dissension within his coalition, which was having repercussions on European issues. In Merz's view, this was not worthy of Germany's image as the most important country in geostrategic terms at the heart of Europe. Two years before coming to power, Friedrich Merz already saw the practice of the "German vote" as a major flaw in Germany's European policy-making, which he called a "total failure" under Olaf Scholz's government.[30] Effective and rapid inter-ministerial coordination is therefore essential to remedying these problems.

Sharing power: mechanisms for coordinating European policy-making in Germany

For historical reasons, the coordination of domestic and European policy-making is based on the idea of sharing rather than concentrating power. Unlike the French model, the need to form coalition governments due to the electoral system, the central role of parliamentarianism, and the federal organization of the country give Germany a political system that is both unique and complex. Indeed, three principles of governance – the principle of Chancellor policy guidelines, the principle of autonomy of ministerial departments, and the principle of collegiality – determine not only the government's actions at the national level but also at the European level. Despite the principle of policy guidelines leadership by the Chancellor, the latter may only resort to it in situations of emergency or major conflict to prevent the erosion of his coalition partners. In German government practice, it appears that the principle of ministerial autonomy is the real guiding principle behind the executive's actions – much more so than in other EU Member States. This is why it is essential for the coordination mechanisms between the ministries responsible for European affairs to function properly. In fact, each ministry, and behind it the party to which it

29. F. Jahn, "Scholz gibt Linie bei EU-Asylverschärfung vor" [Scholz sets the tone for tighter EU asylum rules], *Tageschau*, September 27, 2023, available at: www.tagesschau.de.
30. "EU-Staatschefs hätten 'keine Lust' auf den Kanzler: Merz bezeichnet Scholz als 'Totalausfall' in der Europapolitik" [EU leaders have 'no appetite' for the chancellor: Merz describes Scholz as a 'total failure' in European policy], *Der Tagesspiegel*, December 15, 2024, available at: www.tagesspiegel.de.

belongs, pursues its own agenda above all else and seeks to impose its political priorities as much as possible and to act autonomously. To be sure, the principle of collegiality, which is institutionally reflected in the weekly meeting of the Federal Cabinet, aims to ensure concerted government action. While reaching consensus at the national level is already becoming increasingly difficult,[31] coordinating the federal government's European policy is proving to be an even more daunting task.

Source: illustration made by author © Ifri, 2026.

Coordination on European affairs is divided between three ministries

Coordination on European affairs is divided between different ministries in Germany according to the logic of COREPER I and COREPER II, the two Committees of Permanent Representatives to the Council of the EU, which represent the intergovernmental voice in the legislative process known as the "trilogue" between the Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament. COREPER I deals with issues relating to the internal market, consumer protection, transport, energy, the environment, and education, while COREPER II deals with general and foreign affairs, as well as economic and financial issues (including the budget), justice, and home affairs. With the Single European Act of 1987, a clear division of tasks between federal ministries was gradually established. The issues dealt with by COREPER I come under the authority of Germany's Ministry for Economic Affairs, while those dealt with by COREPER II come mainly under the authority of the Federal Foreign Office (*Auswärtiges Amt*). As the Ministry for Economic Affairs became more "Europeanized" following the economic integration of the internal market, it claimed competence for being the coordinating authority for the connected issues. For its part, the

31. This was clearly illustrated by the debates surrounding the so-called Heating Law in 2023, which caused a crisis in the former "traffic light" coalition. See E. Grasland, "L'Allemagne prend le virage du chauffage vert", *Les Échos*, September 9, 2023, available at: www.lesechos.fr.

Foreign Office has sought to coordinate the broader integration objectives of European policy-making. German administrative practice has thus become more Europeanized insofar as this division reflects the thematic structure of the Council's formations in Brussels and Luxembourg. However, all matters relating to the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (Ecofin) are handled by the Ministry of Finance, currently headed by the SPD and Vice Chancellor Lars Klingbeil.

Within the major European directorates of the three ministries, the departments responsible for coordinating instructions are at the heart of the activity. The three ministries also have "mirror" departments: i.e., thematic units that duplicate those of the coordination ministry, in order to ensure parallel and consistent monitoring of European issues. In practice, this means that the Foreign Office, the Ministry for Economic Affairs, and the Ministry of Finance send their "instructions" to Germany's Permanent Representation to the EU (StäV) after consulting with the "lead" ministry for each policy area. For example, following the European Commission's proposal in February 2025 for an "Omnibus Package", simplifying the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), the Federal Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, officially in charge of the file, drafted the first instruction. This position was then coordinated by the Ministry for Economic Affairs with other ministries in order to reach a joint inter-ministerial position. Once the position has been established and the draft instruction sent to the permanent representation, its diplomats negotiate with their counterparts from other Member States in Brussels. Finally, it is the national ministers who sit on the ten different Council configurations, chaired by the ministers of the country holding the Council presidency (Denmark from July to December 2025, Cyprus since January 2026)[32].

In principle, the Council of Ministers is presented with consolidated proposals ready for decision, originating from the two COREPERs. This structure for decision-making aims to optimize the effectiveness of deliberations by limiting ministerial debates to cases where no consensus could be reached beforehand. Consequently, most of the decisions adopted by the Council are in fact the result of compromises negotiated in advance, mainly within some 150 working groups, the "preparatory bodies of the Council," composed of national ministry officials and representatives of the permanent delegations in Brussels.[33] It is precisely at this level that the real negotiations take shape and where inter-ministerial coordination becomes essential to ensure the consistency of national positions in order to avoid fragmentation of the debates.

32. Except for the Foreign Affairs Council, chaired by the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission, Kaja Kallas. See Council of the European Union, "Council configurations", available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.
33. "Preparatory bodies of the Council", Council of the EU, available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

Responsibility for coordination is shared between the Foreign Office, the Ministry for Economic Affairs, and, to a lesser extent, the Ministry of Finance. The European Affairs Department of the Federal Chancellery may act as a mediator in the event of political disputes between ministries but does not formally exercise any real steering function. The preparation of European Council summits (bringing together heads of state and government) is also shared between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chancellery, depending on the nature of the debate on the agenda.[34]

Horizontal European coordination: German style

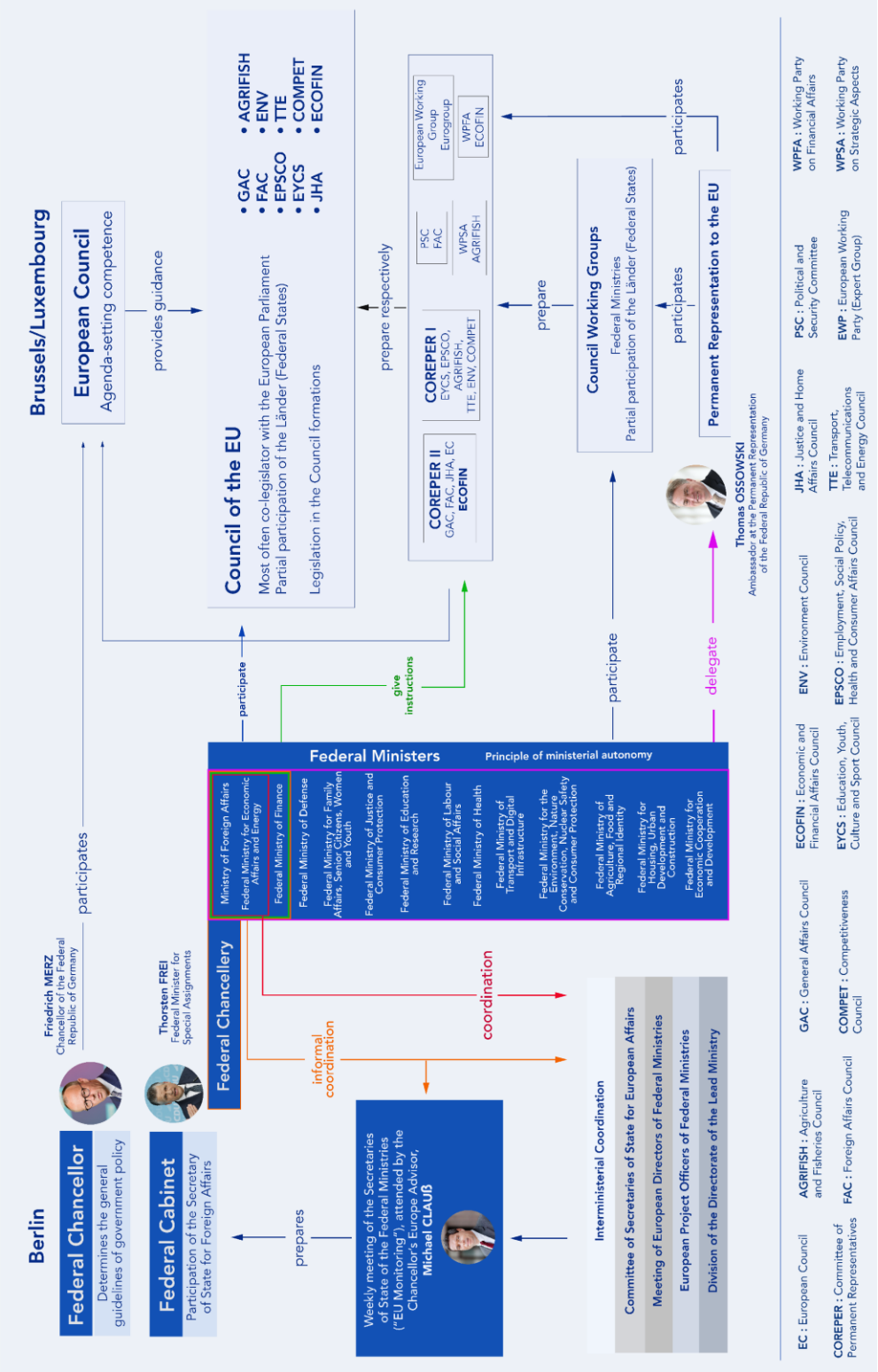
This particularly complex model of inter-ministerial governance contrasts sharply with France, which has established a General Secretariat for European Affairs (*Secrétariat général des affaires européennes* or SGAE) under the authority of the Prime Minister, while the Élysée Palace coordinates the European Council. In the event of disagreement between ministries, the Secretary General for European Affairs himself/herself has the power of arbitration. In certain rare cases, when issues are of major political importance, the European advisor to the President of the Republic or his/her team may participate in the inter-ministerial meetings of the SGAE, to facilitate the search for compromises.

Unlike in France, neither Germany's Federal Foreign Office nor the Ministry for Economic Affairs has the final say in the event of inter-ministerial conflict. It is more common to refer to the ministerial's "right of approval" (*Prüfvorbehalt*), indicating that Germany has not yet reached a common position and reserves the right to examine an issue further, in the hope of reaching an agreement at a later date. It has been this hesitancy of the "German vote" that represents the main flaw in the system, leading to a situation where, as a former senior French diplomat put it, "Germany is nowhere". This situation not only leads to Germany not taking a position during the decision-making process within the various working groups, then in COREPER and the Councils of Ministers. But it also means that Germany is unable to put forward ideas proactively through upstream "non-papers" or when a new initiative presented by the European Commission is published. Given that it is forced to include a wide range of actors in the European policy coordination process, Germany is often unable to clearly express its position. Its culture of inclusiveness and transparency is considered by officials to be an asset to German democracy. By contrast, the German system appears to be "too slow, too cumbersome, and not efficient enough," from the perspective of the French administration.

34. "EU-Handbuch. Entscheidungsprozesse, Koordinierung und Verfahren" [EU Handbook: Decision-making processes, coordination, and procedures], Ministry of Economic Affairs and Energy, 15th edition, 2020.

With his promise of more assertive leadership, Friedrich Merz intends to put an end to Berlin's eternal indecision in Brussels.

German coordination system on European affairs



Source: graphic made by Ifri based on data from Europäische Bewegung Deutschland
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The promise of new German leadership under Friedrich Merz

How the CDU is steering European policy-making

As part of the coalition agreement negotiations between the CDU/CSU and the SPD, the redistribution of ministerial portfolios was a crucial moment for the new division of power between the two coalition partners. Considering that the stability and effectiveness of the EU require greater leadership from Berlin, the CDU wanted to strengthen the coordination of European policies by giving the Federal Chancellery more capacity to anticipate and orchestrate major policy directions. The CDU/CSU sought to centralize coordination within the Chancellery to assert more influence on certain key issues, such as the Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF). But the SPD, which was initially supposed to take over the Foreign Ministry, opposed this move by the CDU/CSU, fearing that it would be marginalized in decision-making on European issues. On the other hand, the Social Democrats wanted to introduce fixed deadlines (*Stichtagsregelung*) to obtain an inter-ministerial position earlier in the coordination process. Ultimately, neither party fully imposed its vision: the Chancellery was given a slightly stronger role thanks to the introduction of a weekly "EU monitoring", but formal coordination remains shared between the three coordinating ministries (Foreign Office, Economic Affairs and Finance). However, as the Conservatives hold the Chancellery, the Foreign Office and the Ministry for Economic Affairs, they have assumed a predominant role in European politics, given that they occupy three of the four government bodies formally responsible for coordinating European affairs. Only the Ministry of Finance is managed by the Social Democrats, though it is a key ministry.

To avoid or resolve potential conflicts between ministries early in decision processes, they are discussed each week under the leadership of the Head of the Chancellery (Thorsten Frei) in the meeting of State Secretaries (*Staatssekretärsausschuss*), and if necessary, at the level of the Federal Cabinet (*Kabinett*).[35]

35. "Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD" *op. cit.*, p. 143.

The Chancellery and the Federal Foreign Office as a single entity

For the first time since 1963, Germany's Foreign Office is led by the political party that also holds the Chancellorship, in this case, the CDU. In terms of coordinating European policy, this has a positive impact because there is now greater alignment between the Chancellery and the Foreign Office. Nevertheless, Merz's colleagues perceive a particularly strong involvement on the part of the Chancellery in the management of European affairs, which is handled by the Foreign Office. This is best illustrated by the creation of a National Security Council (*Nationaler Sicherheitsrat*) within the Chancellery. Inspired by the US *National Security Council* (as well as the French and British models), this body is tasked with coordinating foreign policy, defense, cybersecurity, and intelligence, bringing together the Chancellery, the Federal Ministry of Defense, and the security services. Behind the stated goal of "streamlining" strategic decision-making lies a major institutional transformation, as the center of gravity of German security policy is shifting permanently to the Chancellery, to the detriment of the Foreign Office. This refocusing signals Friedrich Merz's desire for more direct political control over defense issues but also raises questions about how this will fit in with existing European structures, particularly the role of the German ambassador within the EU's Political and Security Committee (PSC). Excessive centralization in Berlin could undermine the coherence of European security and defense policy, at a time when the EU itself was seeking to establish a genuine decision-making center.

Europe occupies an important place on the diplomatic agenda of Friedrich Merz and the CDU. The choice of Johann Wadephul as Minister of Foreign Affairs and Gunther Krichbaum as Deputy Minister for Europe was crucial in this regard: while Gunther Krichbaum chaired the Bundestag's European Affairs Committee between 2007 and 2021, Johann Wadephul also served on this committee for many years. On May 14, 2025, in his speech to the Bundestag, he emphasized the importance of Germany's commitment to the EU: "We must, and we want to assume our responsibilities, in Europe and for Europe. We want to play a mediating role, build majorities, but as the Federal Republic of Germany, we are prepared, if necessary, to lead the way when it is necessary for the security and future of our continent."[36]

36. Author's translation. See "Rede des Bundesministers des Auswärtigen, Dr. Johann Wadephul)" [Speech of Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Johann Wadephul], May 14, 2025, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.

The prevailing principle of ministerial autonomy

While the CDU's influence is felt most strongly in the areas of foreign affairs and security, it should be noted that the principle of ministerial autonomy continues to apply, despite the new distribution of portfolios and the party's dominant position. In practice, this means that the "lead" ministry on a particular issue retains greater decision-making power than the ministry responsible for coordination. Only the Chancellor can override this rule, using his prerogative as head of government. It is therefore necessary to qualify the idea of the CDU's growing influence in the management of European affairs. Tensions related to European coordination most often arise between the ministry responsible for a given issue and other ministries with different political orientations. In the previous coalition, European coordination was the responsibility of two ministries held by the Greens, while the Chancellery was led by the SPD. Most political disputes on issues such as the environment, social policy, economic policy, or industrial policy pitted the Liberals against their partners, some between the SPD and the FDP, and others between the Greens and the FDP, depending on the issues at hand, but not necessarily between the "lead" ministry and the one responsible for coordination.

The strategic choice of political personnel

Interviews with political practitioners confirm that, in addition to the formal coordination structures, the key figures in the Chancellery, carefully selected by Friedrich Merz, are decisive for the success of a more cohesive and effective European policy. Merz's task was to find advisors who would be able to act more clearly in interpersonal relations between ministerial administrators, the Chancellery, and the permanent representation in Brussels. Although Friedrich Merz himself gained European experience as a Member of the European Parliament in the 1990s, he is keen to surround himself with loyal allies who occupy strategic positions and who are familiar with the decision-making processes of national and European administrations, which have become more complex today. From this point of view, the choice of his "European sherpa" was particularly important.

In this context, Merz chose Michael Clauß,[37] former German ambassador to the Union and a well-known figure in EU decision-making

37. A career diplomat in the Federal Foreign Office, Michael Clauß began his career in the ministry's central administration before taking on various assignments abroad, notably in China and Israel. In 2013, he was appointed German ambassador to China, a prominent position he held until 2020, a period marked by intensified economic and diplomatic exchanges between Berlin and Beijing. Michael Clauß then joined Germany's Permanent Representation to the European Union, which he headed between 2020 and 2025 before being appointed European Affairs Advisor to the Chancellor's Office.

circles. According to interviews with political observers in Berlin, Friedrich Merz chose Clauß for his ability to quickly grasp complex issues and arbitrate between different ministerial interests. His appointment is part of a strategy to strengthen control over the flow of information between Brussels and the federal Chancellery, notably through the new weekly "EU monitoring" mechanism, which brings together the secretaries of state before each cabinet meeting. While serving as ambassador in Brussels, Clauß made headlines with an "urgent letter" (*Brandbrief*) sent to Berlin in January 2023, in which he warned of internal divisions within the previous "traffic light" coalition government, amid mounting procedural missteps.[38]

His successor in Brussels, Thomas Ossowski,[39] who has been in office since the end of August 2025, complements this approach with a more geopolitical profile. Ossowski is a former ambassador to Türkiye and German representative on the Political and Security Committee (PSC).[40] According to a German correspondent in Brussels, he supports Friedrich Merz's political line, thereby consolidating a Merz-Clauß-Ossowski axis at the heart of the German government's European policy-making. This trio works directly with Thorsten Frei,[41] Minister of State for Special Affairs, who benefits from the EU Monitoring early warning system, set up to report on strategic issues.

However, the centralization of European politics around this core raises questions, particularly regarding the place of actors from other political backgrounds. This balancing act highlights the limits of the Chancellor's room for maneuver and that of his coalition agreement negotiators in reshaping the administration in Berlin that manages European affairs.

38. "Das steht im 'Brandbrief' des deutschen EU-Botschafters" [What the 'urgent letter' from Germany's EU ambassador contains], *Table Media*, January 31, 2023, available at: https://table.media.

39. Thomas Ossowski has pursued a diplomatic career marked by steadily increasing responsibilities within the German Foreign Office. He has worked in several sensitive contexts, notably as the permanent representative in Rwanda, the civilian head of a reconstruction team in Afghanistan, ambassador to the Philippines, with responsibility for several Pacific states, before turning his attention more towards European affairs. In Berlin and then Brussels, he specialized in coordinating European policy, particularly in matters relating to the EU budget and institutions. In 2024, he took charge of the European Union delegation in Türkiye, a position dominated by issues of neighborhood relations, migration, and enlargement policy. Since 2025, he has represented Germany in the European Union, a role that places him at the heart of European negotiations and the relationship between Berlin and the EU institutions.

40. More information on how the PSC operates can be found on the Council's website, "Political and Security Committee (PSC)", available at: www.consilium.europa.eu.

41. Thorsten Frei pursued a political career, first at the local level and then at the federal level. After holding administrative positions in the government of Baden-Württemberg, he became mayor of Donaueschingen for nearly a decade. 2013 marked the beginning of a second phase of his career, focused on parliamentary work. He has specialized in legal and domestic affairs and has held various coordinating positions within the CDU/CSU group. His appointment as first parliamentary secretary in 2021 placed him at the heart of the group's internal organization, a role in which procedural matters and the management of legislative processes take precedence. In 2025, when he became Head of the Federal Chancellery, he also became the point of contact between the Chancellor, the ministries and Parliament.

Asserting European sovereignty: a matter of EU competitiveness and security

Friedrich Merz has made competitiveness and security in the EU the cornerstone of his European strategy. Before coming into power, while he was still leader of the opposition, Merz played an active role in shaping the political priorities of the CDU/CSU group within the European People's Party (EPP) in preparation for the strategy ahead of the European elections in June 2024.

Thus, questioning the "European Green Deal" was the main theme of the German Conservatives and the EPP's campaign. A member of the CDU/CSU group in the Bundestag sees this as a "major victory" for Merz over Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, who is also a member of the same political family as Merz, but who belongs to a more moderate wing of the CDU and was closer to former Chancellor Angela Merkel. According to this colleague, Friedrich Merz had put the issue of bureaucratic simplification on the agenda well before he came to power in May 2025. It was thanks to this preliminary work that he was able to influence the European Commission's policy guidelines, presented in July 2024 by Ursula von der Leyen, and subsequently the Commission's resulting work plan.[42] When it comes to competitiveness, Merz and von der Leyen's political positions are only partially aligned. Both recognize that excessive regulation can hinder innovation and investment, and that simplification is desirable. But Merz is calling for a structural review of the pace of regulation and a return of certain decisions to the national level. Speaking to leaders of small and medium-sized enterprises at the end of September 2025, he went even further by describing the EU as a European legislative "machine" that needed "a spoke in its wheel."[43] In contrast, Ursula von der Leyen takes a more measured approach, seeking to ease constraints without calling into question the EU's broad climate, social, or innovation policies. Merz wishes to slow down and restrict the pace and scope of Brussels' regulatory output, not only to preserve German industrial competitiveness but also to make the European project more legitimate in the eyes of its population. This can be seen as a clear response to pro-business advocates and representatives of small and medium-sized enterprises who complain about excessive bureaucracy in Germany. These voters are increasingly leaning toward voting for the far-right AfD party, which made the European

42. U. von der Leyen, "Europe's Choice: Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024-2029", Commission Work Program, February 2025, available at: https://commission.europa.eu. The work program specifies that 11 out of 18 policy initiatives are aimed at legislative simplification.
43. "Merz will Brüssel 'das Stöckchen in die Räder halten'", *Die Zeit*, 26 September 2025, available at: www.zeit.de.

Union and its so-called "over-regulation" one of its key slogans during the last parliamentary elections (in February 2025).[44]

Beyond this, Friedrich Merz is seeking to develop a German vision of European sovereignty, with particular emphasis on its security and defense policy as a prerequisite for European strategic autonomy. This can be seen as a deliberate break with the German tradition of restraint in defense matters. Following on from the "change of era" (*Zeitenwende*) brought about by the previous Chancellor, Olaf Scholz, Friedrich Merz is now speaking of a genuine geopolitical and domestic "historic turning point" (*Epochenbruch*).[45] Among the most pressing issues regarding the reorientation of Germany's security policy are the transformation of the German army, the Bundeswehr,[46] and Germany's spending of 5% of its gross domestic product on defense to meet the demands of US President Donald Trump and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) new objectives.[47] In his general policy speech to the Bundestag on May 14, 2025, Merz stated that the government would make "all financial resources available to ensure that the federal army becomes the most powerful conventional army in Europe."[48] In this context, in mid-March 2025 and before the new Bundestag elected on February 23, 2025, took office, Friedrich Merz managed to get the outgoing legislature to relax Germany's "debt brake," with the support of his future coalition partner (the SPD), but also by the Greens, who were to be in opposition. This was a necessary move to mobilize the considerable financial and political resources needed for the transformation of the German defense sector. The German government can henceforth take on debt beyond 1% of GDP if it involves investing in defense without having to comply with the golden rule of fiscal policy.[49] But money alone will not be enough to bring about this "historical shift". Germany traditionally sees itself as a "civilian power" (*Zivilmacht*).[50]

44. V. Dubslaff, "The Rise of the AfD and the Choice of Radicalism," *Notes du Cerfa*, No. 189, Ifri, available at: www.ifri.org.

45. S. Seidendorf, "The New German Government: A Turning Point for Europe?," *Schuman Papers*, No. 792, Robert Schuman Foundation, May 26, 2025.

46. However, the debate over the reintroduction of military service illustrates the internal tensions within the coalition. Merz and part of the CDU/CSU have advocated for a modulated compulsory service, while the SPD has preferred to maintain a voluntary military.

47. This 5% breaks down into 3.5% of GDP for "traditional" military spending and 1.5% for defense-related infrastructure investments. See M. Dembinski and H.-J. Spanger, "Die Zukunft der NATO" [The future of NATO], Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, June 2025, available at: https://library.fes.de.

48. *Regierungserklärung* [Government statement] – Merz: "Bundeswehr soll 'konventionell zur stärksten Armee Europas' werden" [Merz: The Bundeswehr should become 'the strongest conventional army in Europe'], German Bundestag, May 14, 2025, available at: www.bundestag.de.

49. Deutscher Bundestag, "Mehrheit für Reform der Schuldenbremse: 512 Abgeordnete stimmen mit Ja" [Majority in favor of reforming the debt brake: 512 members of parliament vote yes], March 2025, available at: www.bundestag.de.

50. H. Maull, "'Zivilmacht': Ursprünge und Entwicklungspfade eines umstrittenen Konzeptes" [Civilian power: Origins and development paths of a controversial concept], in: S. Harnisch and J. Schild (eds.), *Deutsche Außenpolitik und internationale Führung. Ressourcen, Praktiken und Politiken in einer*

But this must change, and it needs to view itself as a major power, ready to give birth to a more militaristic culture in line with the Chancellor's adage: "We want to be able to defend ourselves so that we don't have to defend ourselves."[51] In doing so, Merz largely echoes the ideas already outlined by President Macron in his first speech at the Sorbonne in 2017 concerning European security, which was one of the "six keys to EU sovereignty."[52]

In this regard, and in parallel with its national agenda, the German government has actively supported European initiatives such as SAFE (Secure and Fast Acquisition of European Defense Capabilities) and EDIP (European Defense Industry Program), which are designed to pool procurement and strengthen the continent's defense industrial base. Friedrich Merz has positioned himself as a defender of SAFE, as a financial pillar of European rearmament, while ensuring that the rules remain flexible enough not to lock Germany into overly rigid protectionism. In his public statements, he has emphasized three imperatives: rapid capacity building, prioritizing European suppliers, and maintaining compatibility with NATO commitments, which means retaining a margin for certain components or systems of American origin. He sees SAFE and EDIP as instruments of industrial consolidation that should enable both the structuring of a European defense market and the stabilization of German manufacturing.

However, negotiations on SAFE and EDIP have highlighted sensitive divisions between Member States. Some governments fear that these measures would disproportionately benefit large producers, primarily Germany, France, and Italy. Others, particularly in Northern and Central-Eastern Europe, have sought to relax European preference clauses, whether in terms of the proportion of non-EU components or the participation of third countries, to preserve existing partnerships and ensure rapid access to critical capabilities, particularly where European supply remains insufficient. The compromise reached stipulates that new purchases must contain at least 65% of European components. This is a diplomatic victory for Paris, which has long advocated for a kind of *de facto* "Buy European Defense Act", based on strict rules regarding European content, limited access to financing for non-EU equipment, and the assumed use of Community instruments.[53] In discussions on these programs, France and the Commission have therefore pushed for strict eligibility criteria to

veränderten Europäischen Union [German foreign policy and international leadership: Resources, practices, and policies in a changed European Union], Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014, pp. 121-147.

51. F. Merz, "Erste Regierungserklärung 'Verantwortung für Deutschland'" [First government statement: 'Responsibility for Germany'], May 14, 2025, available at: www.bundesregierung.de.

52. The six keys include security, border control, foreign policy, ecological transition, digital technology, and industrial and monetary economic power. See E. Pestel and J. Süß, "Vive l'Europe – French European policy-making under Emmanuel Macron", *Analysis*, Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, European Dialogue, April 2022, p. 8, available at: www.freiheit.org.

53. C. Grant, "The French Paradox", *Insight*, Center for European Reform, December 10, 2025, available at: www.cer.eu.

prevent European funds from ultimately being used to finance purchases of American or British equipment.

The shift in defense policy comes at a decisive moment for Germany, Europe's leading industrial power. In the short and medium term, the development of German defense industry capabilities is likely to profoundly change the economic landscape, helping to maintain production levels and employment. If Germany manages to focus its efforts on future defense technologies while building on its existing industrial strengths, then this stimulus could even support long-term growth. The German arms industry is also set to play a key role in building Ukraine's deterrence capabilities. This repositioning opens up prospects beyond the NATO framework alone and offers Europe, and Germany in particular, the opportunity to counter the risk of deindustrialization by structuring a genuine mass defense industry.[54] In a context where military threats have once again become a central factor in European geopolitics, the concrete implementation of continental rearmament appears to be the condition for translating the spirit of the "change of era" (*Zeitenwende*), followed by Merz's "historic turning point" (*Epochenbruch*), into a sustainable industrial and strategic reality. On foreign policy and security issues, Lars Klingbeil, Vice-Chancellor and Minister of Finance, and Boris Pistorius, who remains in charge of defense (both are members of the SPD), largely agree with Friedrich Merz in advocating for a stronger *Bundeswehr*, showing resolute support for Ukraine, and supporting a leading role for Germany in European security and defense. Speaking with one voice, therefore, seems easier for the federal government in this area, unlike in other policy areas such as the economy or the environment, which demonstrate how closely the exercise of European policy in Berlin remains linked to the internal balances of the coalition.

54. R. Fehrenbach, J. Flemming, and J. Friedlander, "Waiting for the Big Bang: Executing the European Defense Build-Up in Germany. An Exclusive Policy Brief for the Transatlantic Forum on GeoEconomics 2025 in Brussels", Atlantik Brücke, September 29, 2029, available at: www.atlantik-bruecke.

Between ambitions and realities: The Merz Government's first steps in European policy-making

Chancellor Merz is caught between the CDU's agenda of competitiveness and the SPD's high expectations in terms of social and climate justice, both partisan red lines that are undermining the coherence of Germany's position in Brussels. The introduction of new coordination instruments has not prevented coalition partners from testing the limits of procedures or even circumventing them when they feel marginalized. Social Democratic ministers have sought to address European institutions or public opinion directly in several emblematic cases. At the same time, the Chancellery has strengthened its grip on defining European policy, at the risk of fueling a climate of mutual mistrust. Against this backdrop of tensions, the episodes of deadlock, tactical "non-votes," and the Chancellor's ill-timed statements in Brussels take on particular significance, fueling doubts among his European partners about Berlin's ability to speak with one voice.

A Chancellor clashing with his coalition

Several policy issues demonstrate that there are still flaws in the German system for coordinating European policy. These first few months of government action by the CDU-SPD coalition have been marked by a series of compromises, internal tensions, and adjustments in the way Germany coordinates its European policy, demonstrating both the ambitions of the new government and the limits it faces. The establishment of a joint list of divisive issues within the government that ministries must "monitor" to reach a joint agreement has made the coordination process more transparent.[55] However, the political practices of the first few months of the government show that the parties are seeking to increase conflicts through various internal and public communication channels, as well as negotiation techniques in Brussels, to distinguish themselves from one another rather than appearing as a coherent actor in European politics.

55. J. Olk, "Von Merz angekündigte neue EU-Politik lässt auf sich warten" [New EU policy announced by Merz is a long time coming], *Handelsblatt*, Octobre 1, 2025, available at: www.handelsblatt.com.

Bypassing the European policy coordination process: the case of the SPD

The debate surrounding the EU's Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) illustrates that the Social Democrats do not fully appreciate the Chancellery's increased involvement in the coordination of European affairs. As confirmed by an SPD parliamentary aide, the Social Democrats felt "compelled" to bypass the official coordination process because they felt that their interests had been marginalized by the CDU. Initially, the coalition agreement provided for the abolition of Germany's own "Due Diligence Law", adopted under the Scholz government. The compromise struck between the CDU and the SPD during coalition talks was to scrap the national legislation while retaining the European directive. However, upon taking office, Friedrich Merz announced his intention to dismantle not only Germany's due diligence framework but also the CSDDD at the European level, in close coordination with Emmanuel Macron, who publicly endorsed the idea.[56] However, this unilateral proclamation was poorly received by SPD Vice-Chancellor Lars Klingbeil, who reminded Friedrich Merz that he had to respect his party's commitments in the Coalition Agreement by maintaining the Directive while simplifying it. Indeed, this was a crucial issue, dear to the Social Democrats. Consequently, the European Commission's initiative to simplify the Directive known as "*stop the clock*", which followed in spring 2025, was closely monitored by the SPD. In its proposal, the Commission suggested reducing the scope of the CSDDD, which should include a higher threshold for the number of employees in the companies covered (up from 1,000 to 5,000), and with a minimum turnover of €1.5 million.[57] The discord between the various German ministers caused embarrassment among German negotiators during the summer of 2025, who were unable to clearly explain Germany's official position on the issue.

Believing that these limitations significantly weaken the social and ethical scope of the Directive, the SPD, through its Ministry of Labor, attempted to bypass the usual channels of inter-ministerial coordination to better defend its position. To this end, instead of submitting its demands through the ministry responsible for coordinating the dossier (in this case, the Ministry for Economic Affairs), the Ministry of Labor contacted Germany's permanent representation in Brussels directly. Unsurprisingly, this initiative provoked a backlash within the CDU, especially since the SPD

56. J. Hanke Vela, J. Olk, and C. Volkery, "Wie Merz und Macron die Lieferkettenrichtlinie entschärfen wollen" [How Merz and Macron want to water down the Due Diligence Law], June 9, 2025, *Handelsblatt*, available at: www.handelsblatt.com.
57. S. de la Feld, "EU Due Diligence, Downward Compromise Fails in the European Parliament. Clash between EPP and S&D", Euronews, October 22, 2025, available at: www.eunews.it.

made it public by revealing it to the press.[58] In this regard, a ministry coordinator warned against this type of practice: "Such a misstep should not be repeated. We had to 'give the SPD a talking-to' to get them to follow the procedures." The most likely scenario was therefore another "German vote" by the Merz government. However, during the vote in COREPER I in July 2025, the German representative remained silent; a "procedural trick" that, according to a European affairs official, effectively amounted to an approval. For its part, this approach, led by the Chancellery, greatly displeased the SPD, which emphasized the importance of transparent coordination. However, Germany's official position was decided before the inter-institutional trilogue process with Parliament began.

This was compounded by an early-September visit to Brussels by Bärbel Kofler, Parliamentary State Secretary at the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), during which she voiced concerns that the directive was being watered down. She met not only with the current permanent representative, Thomas Ossowski, but also with several key Social Democratic MEPs from the S&D group in the European Parliament.[59] The aim appears to have been to push for a stricter position within the European Parliament, which was due to vote on the amendment to the Directive on October 22, 2025.

Indeed, the European Parliament's rejection on October 22 of the relaxation of the CSDDD as well as of the Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) has reignited tensions between conservatives and social democrats. The vote also revealed flaws within the "von der Leyen majority" in the European Parliament (including the EPP, S&D, and Renew parliamentary groups). Despite the secret nature of the vote, it appears that it was mainly the European Social Democrats, including Germany's SPD, who probably voted against the proposal.[60] Friedrich Merz publicly condemned the European Parliament's rejection, calling it "unacceptable" and a "fatal mistake" that needed to be "corrected."[61] This criticism was perceived as outright contempt by the President of the European Parliament, Roberta Metsola, who strongly rejected this "interference" by Friedrich Merz in the democratic process and the independent role of the European Parliament, which Merz would like to circumvent as much as possible.[62] The final vote on November 13 once again highlighted the divisions within the "von der Leyen majority." The

58. H. Kafsack, "Schwarz-roter Offenbarungseid in Brüssel" [Black–Red Coalition's Admission of Failure in Brussels], *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, July 4, 2025, available at: www.faz.net.
59. B. Kofler, LinkedIn post, September 2025, available at: www.linkedin.com.
60. J. McGowan, "EU Parliament Delays Vote on Sustainability Reporting Reductions, Adds Uncertainty", Forbes, October 23, 2025, available at: www.forbes.com.
61. "Merz kritisiert Europaparlament scharf" [Merz critizises EU Parliament harshly], *Handelsblatt*, October 12, 2025, available at: www.handelsblatt.com.
62. "Parlamentspräsidentin Metsola rüffelt Friedrich Merz" [Parliamentary President Metsola reprimands Friedrich Merz], *Der Spiegel*, October 23, 2025, available at: www.spiegel.de.

EPP, under the leadership of Manfred Weber, is said to have actively sought to push through the Directive with a vote from the far right, but without the votes of the S&D and Renew, which was a first in Brussels.[63] It remains to be seen to what extent such ad hoc alliances will recur. What is clear, however, is that the erosion of trust between the EPP and the S&D groups to which the CDU and SPD MEPs belong has undermined cooperation between the two parties in Berlin, particularly at the level of parliamentary coordination in the Bundestag. Despite the SPD's strong position in the Chancellery, one Social Democratic MP working on European affairs argues that Friedrich Merz should press the German EPP delegation (CDU/CSU) to seek open compromises rather than, as he put it, "make common cause with the far right."

Against this backdrop, the appointment of Niclas Herbst as successor to Daniel Caspary as head of the CDU/CSU delegation in the European Parliament will require repairing the damage done in recent months and restoring a functioning bridge between the executive and legislative branches in Berlin and Brussels.[64]

Bypassing the coordination process: The case of the CDU

Another point of contention that illustrates the difficulties in coordinating European policy concerns the EU's climate policy. The fact that Chancellor Friedrich Merz has repeatedly expressed his exasperation in recent months at "excessive climate protection" is a sign of a notable shift in German environmental policy after three years of a "traffic light" coalition including the Greens in government.

In the Coalition Agreement, both parties agreed to support the climate targets proposed by the European Commission, which aim to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 90% by 2040 across the EU. In line with his competitiveness-focused agenda, however, Friedrich Merz had committed to the government adopting a cautious stance, contrary to the position taken by Environment Minister Carsten Schneider (SPD). The latter supported the objectives proposed by the European Commission, which were to be set at the Council of Environment Ministers in mid-September 2025. However, under pressure from Italy and with the backing of the Chancellery in Berlin, the issue was deferred until October 22, when it was to be taken up by the European Council. The purpose of this postponement

63. J. Diesteldorf and J. Kelnberger, "Streit über Nachhaltigkeit und Klima zerreißt Europas Demokraten" [Dispute over sustainability and climate tears Europe's democrats apart], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, November 13, 2025, available at: www.sueddeutsche.de.
64. "Neuer Vorsitz. Norddeutscher kommt an Spitze der Europa-Unionsabgeordneten" [New chairmanship: Northern German takes the helm of European Union parliamentarians], *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, December 10, 2025, available at: www.sueddeutsche.de.

was to buy time and to allow heads of state and government to take greater political ownership of the dossier. According to a German journalist in Brussels, however, this amounted to a "violation of European coordination procedures."

Unlike the Council of Environment Ministers, where decisions are taken by qualified majority, the European Council operates by unanimity. Against this institutional backdrop, Germany's intended position – caught between that of Carsten Schneider on the one hand and Friedrich Merz on the other – remained unclear, creating uncertainty about Berlin's ability to articulate a coherent line at the European level. Yet a shift in Germany's stance could have been decisive for securing the qualified majority required in the Council.[65] Ultimately, the environment ministers of the 27 Member States took up the issue, deciding to relax the climate targets while ensuring that the EU would not be left without a mandate at COP30, thereby allowing everyone to save face.

The climate targets set for 2040 are a prime example of how the Chancellery (CDU) has sought to encroach on the prerogatives of the Ministry of the Environment. It is likely that this type of disagreement between the Chancellery and the Ministry for Economic Affairs (CDU) on the one hand, and the Ministry of Environment (SPD) on the other, will occur more frequently in the future, as demonstrated by the government's hesitant stance at COP30 in Belém.

European reactions to Germany's new leadership

Since becoming Chancellor, Friedrich Merz has been working to redefine Germany's place in the EU. Over the past few months, he has proven himself to be a reliable crisis manager in a tense international and geopolitical context, whether in relation to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, negotiations with Donald Trump on customs tariffs, or peace in Gaza. The Chancellor has stepped up his European travels to Paris, Warsaw, and Brussels, where he has strengthened his relations with Ursula von der Leyen and António Costa in order to revive common dynamics in industrial competitiveness and European defense.

However, this proactive approach contrasts sharply with the situation in France. Paris has been entangled in successive government reshuffles and is struggling to maintain its image as a reliable partner, even though Emmanuel Macron retains foreign and European affairs as his "domaine reservé". Repeated warnings from Brussels about France's public deficit,

65. K. Schmid, "Europas Klimaziele wegen Deutschland auf der Kippe" [Europe's climate targets hanging in the balance because of Germany], *Tagesschau*, September 18, 2025, available at: www.tagesschau.de.

combined with social tensions and the prospect of a change in government in 2027, have undermined the French government's credibility on the European stage. Thus, Friedrich Merz stands out more for his consistency than his inspiration, whereas Paris risks appearing to be more of a supporting player.

A Franco-German agenda put to the test

However, Franco-German relations remain the decisive link in Friedrich Merz's European policy-making. The agenda adopted at the 25th Franco-German Ministerial Council in Toulon on August 29, 2025, signals a renewed effort to revitalize the bilateral partnership through a roadmap dense with proposals, with competitiveness as a central objective.[66] Spanning energy transition, industrial innovation, digital sovereignty, and European defense, the initiative seeks to restore the partnership's ability to deliver concrete results. The challenge now is to translate these guidelines into tangible results with projects in shared hydrogen infrastructure, coordination of industrial policies, and a revival of joint military programs. But this ambition remains fragile given the political instability in France, which casts doubt on Paris's ability to stay the course and mobilize the necessary resources. Added to this are fundamental differences that are unlikely to disappear, as demonstrated by the debate surrounding joint armament projects (SCAF, MGSC) and initiatives in trade policy.[67]

Thus, at the European Council meeting at the end of October 2025, the German Chancellor took his partners, particularly France, by surprise when he announced that the free trade agreement with the Mercosur countries was close to being finalised and should be ratified swiftly. This triggered tensions with France, as Emmanuel Macron was presented with a fait accompli by Friedrich Merz.

At the European Council of December 18, the final decision was once again postponed until mid-January, but it ultimately resulted in a vote in favour of the agreement, with France voting against it, unlike Italy, which ultimately aligned itself with the majority of member states. Despite adjustments introduced by the Commission on safeguard clauses, mirror measures and the strengthening of controls, Paris maintains that the Mercosur agreement still fails to meet European environmental and agricultural standards and that it would undermine the coherence of the European agricultural model and weaken climate safeguards.[68]

66. "Conseil des ministres franco-allemand : initiatives phares en matière de coopération bilatérale", Élysée, September 2, available at: www.elysee.fr.
67. J. Möhring, "Troubled Twins: The FCAS and MGCS Weapon Systems and Franco-German Cooperation", *Ifri Studies*, Ifri, available at: www.ifri.org.
68. "Merz irritiert mit Aussagen zu Mercosur-Abkommen" [Merz causes irritation with statements on Mercosur agreement], *Tagesschau*, October 24, 2025, available at: www.tagesschau.de.

Germany, by contrast, seeks to strengthen the EU's position in globalisation through the conclusion of additional trade agreements, while France stresses the need to reconcile openness with regulation, an approach often viewed as protectionist by German policymakers. The episode does not amount to a rupture, but it does illustrate a persistent divergence in approach despite the renewed momentum in the bilateral relationship.

However, this bilateral dynamism does not necessarily translate into day-to-day collaboration in Brussels, as evidenced by exchanges with French and German diplomats. Depending on the issue, France and Germany will choose each other as their preferred ally to further their interests. But often their interests are opposed, as in trade, environmental, or energy policy. "On many issues, cooperation with our German counterparts is difficult", sums up a French diplomat working at the French Mission to the EU. Despite the willingness at the highest level between Merz and Macron and extensive diplomatic exchanges across ministries on both sides of the Rhine, these efforts did not translate into systematic special consultation during the preparations for the various Council formations (working groups, COREPER I and II). The appointment of exchange diplomats to key positions, such as the SGAE or within the Chancellery, could help mitigate the existing deficit in mutual understanding of respective administrative and diplomatic practices. This approach could be further extended through the exchange of diplomats posted in Brussels. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that current mechanisms have not ensured that coordination and exchanges in Brussels operate as smoothly as those between the two capitals.

Toward a more vertical understanding of power at the expense of inter-community relations?

Within European diplomatic circles, some observers point to a re-emergence of a German approach more strongly anchored in intergovernmentalism and influenced by the thinking of Wolfgang Schäuble. Developed in the mid-1990s together with Karl Lamers, this concept was based on the vision of a multi-tiered Europe, structured around a core group of states capable of advancing more rapidly in political and economic integration.[69] This was more than a federalist project pursuing the emergence of supranational EU institutions, but it was a vision that reflected a pragmatic conception of European power. It was based on coordination between governments and maintaining a strong center of gravity between Paris and Berlin. Friedrich Merz now seems to be reviving

69. W. Schäuble and K. Lamers, "Überlegungen zur europäischen Politik. Positionspapier der CDU/CSU Fraktion im Bundestag" [Reflections on European policy: Position paper of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group in the Bundestag], September 1994, available at: www.cvce.eu.

some of these traits, favoring a Union refocused on effective decision-making rather than dynamic institutional integration. Making greater use of bridging clauses, as suggested by the CDU and SPD in their Coalition Agreement, could be a pragmatic step in this direction.[70]

This orientation is also reflected in the relationship between the Chancellor and Ursula von der Leyen. It oscillates between cooperation and caution, marked by genuine political complementarity but fraught with mistrust. Merz and the key figures around him (Thomas Ossowski, Michael Clauß, and Thorsten Frei) support the major European programs promoted by the Commission in the areas of defense and industry, but fear that they will become instruments of institutional assertion rather than strategic convergence. Behind this reserve lies an old tension between the intergovernmental logic of the Council and the Commission's growing desire for autonomy. Merz is aware of this balance and is seeking to reaffirm the role of heads of state and government as the true political leaders of the Union, reminding Brussels that the legitimacy of European action rests above all on the will of the Member States.

This position is more calculated than doctrinal, and paints a picture of a Germany keen to regain control over the pace and direction of the European project. It is neither a break *with* nor a return *to* the past, but more of a strategic readjustment in which Europe remains the horizon, but one that Berlin wishes to shape more in its own interests.

70. "Verantwortung für Deutschland. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD" *op. cit.*, p. 138.

Change of course in Germany's European policy-making?

A few months after the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition took office, the government's European policy appears to be at a crossroads, caught between ambitions for leadership and persistent structural divisions. Upon assuming office, Friedrich Merz sought to impose a demanding interpretation of Germany's role in Europe, centred on competitiveness, sovereignty, and a clear intention to shape the redefinition of European policy priorities. This approach, however, regularly collides with the SPD's emphasis on preserving the social and climate acquis.

The trade-offs inherent in negotiations on the future Multiannual Financial Framework for 2028–2035 underscore the difficulty of maintaining governmental cohesion. They reveal the tension between strict fiscal discipline and the need for substantial investment to address the evolving geopolitical environment and industrial transitions. In Brussels, the perception of a Germany that has returned to a more calculating posture and appears less inclined toward federalism has generated cautious expectations among many partners, while also raising questions about the credibility of a European recovery led by Berlin.

Despite efforts to strengthen the Chancellor's role in shaping European policy, Germany's institutional architecture, based on a careful balance among ministries and characterised by a high degree of ministerial autonomy, limits any move toward more centralised control by the Chancellery. The preservation of institutional pluralism within Germany's parliamentary democracy, as enshrined in the Basic Law, inevitably produces inertia. This makes it difficult for Berlin to provide sustained momentum for European integration, even as it ensures political continuity and stability.

Recent institutional developments in Germany suggest that strengthening European expertise within individual ministries may offer a more effective path toward greater coherence and efficiency. Such an approach would allow Germany to reassert itself as a driving force in Europe without resorting to excessive centralization of European policy-making within the Chancellery. The French experience, where the presidentialization of European policy has failed to halt the erosion of domestic support, also counsels caution regarding leadership models that are overly personalized and heavily focused on European and international agendas.

Against this backdrop, the Merz government's diplomacy, widely praised for its responsiveness and openness to forging new alliances, faces a narrow window of opportunity to structure an ambitious Franco-German agenda. This challenge is compounded by the prospect of significant political realignment in France after 2027. Under these conditions, consolidating the Franco-German partnership while pursuing a measured diversification of European alliances appears essential if Germany is to retain the capacity to adapt and to advance sustainable initiatives within the Union.

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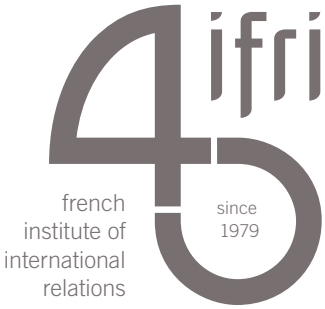

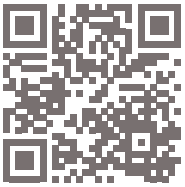

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