

*These Weimar Triangle Analyses are a joint publication by the **French Institute of International Relations (IFRI)**, the **Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)** and the **German Council of Foreign Relations (DGAP)**. Their purpose is to give the French, Polish, and German viewpoints on central questions concerning European politics and European integration.*

In the current issue, our Weimar Triangle contributors address the question of power in the European Union in response to an article by Josef Janning "State power within European Integration – On the limits and context of Germany's power in the Union" (DGAPanalyse kompakt 1, May 2013). Which member states have power and why do they?

States' Power in the European Union: Statistics have never been the source of French power

Yann-Sven Rittelmeyer

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Member states' power in the European Union (EU) is a question as old as its foundation. In the EU, all states are supposedly equal, yet they do not have the same power. The question of power has generally been asked in regard to transfers of sovereignty. The potential loss of state power has been at the centre of attention from the very beginning of the European construction (through the questions of, on the one hand, equality between the member states and, on the other hand, a proportional representation and vote). Thus, the respective power of the different member states have mainly been discussed when treaties were (re)negotiated. Josef Janning's [contribution](#)ⁱ is an interesting attempt to compare member states' power in a particular period and to list the criteria determining the power of member states. The factors taken into account concern not only central statistical data, but also the commitment, credibility, and strategic position of the different states.

The elements beyond the statistical data of the country are particularly important in the French case. France has always seen itself as quite independent from structural and cyclical elements. It experienced the first decade of the European Economic Community under Charles de Gaulle's leadership and has since then continued to be influenced by several of his thoughts on the European integration process. The European project was perceived as an extension of France's power and a way to increase France's role on the international scene. In this regard, France was supposed to have a leading role in a Europe that could become the third power between the two big powers of the Cold War. Simultaneously, the fear of a loss of sovereignty

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– largely understood as a determinant of the state’s power – has characterised the French state of mind regarding the European construction and explains its uncomfortable relation to deepening integration.

France's power in the EU has mainly been based on politics and military. Its population, GDP, and its geographical size and position gave it *de facto* status of a big member state. Being a founding member and a very close partner of Germany have added to France’s capacity to play a leading European political and military role.

However, the current crises have put an important emphasis on the economic and financial sectors. This has brought to light the French difficulties in the latter. In the last decade, French GDPⁱⁱ in the EU has proportionally decreased while its unemployment rate increased, relegating it to a weaker position. After having envied the “German model” and being accused of following Germany, France tried to counterbalance Germany’s power by underlining its diverging opinions and assuming an attitude of “friendly tension” with its partner. Nonetheless, the cyclical situation or personal strategies of the leaders cannot affect the strong need of both partners to work together. Even if Germany is the most powerful member state, it could not act as a hegemonic power, nor does it aspire to do so. This explains why Germany needs and wants to cooperate with France. And France can increase its power by either being on Germany’s side or by contradicting it with the goal of reaching a compromise.

France has reacted to the current economic and financial situation with an inward looking, defensive strategy. This attitude echoes the French scepticism toward globalisation. It is also a prolongation of the last French electoral campaign in which the “national” side was omnipresent in the discourses – not only from the extreme right (Marine Le Pen) and left (Jean-Luc Mélenchon) but also from the governing parties – which put an economic focus on the “made in France.” Arnaud Montebourg, the French Minister of Industrial Renewal, who is supported by the left wing of the socialist party, currently embodies this policy.

For the moment, France does not really seem to be following an offensive strategy, neither in terms of internal reforms, nor by coalition building. At the beginning of his mandate, François Hollande looked to the South with the hope to counterbalance Germany’s power and be able to speak to Angela Merkel on equal footing. The economic situation and political instability of these southern countries heavily impacted this strategy. Moreover, the institutional and moral obligations attached to the Franco-German relationship, particularly strong in this Franco-German year, rapidly caught up with the new French president.

The EU is a complex system with multiple ties, in which member state’s power cannot be evaluated without taking into account the EU institution’s roles and practices, and their ability to influence the discussions. In the EU, practices have often proven to be more potent than formal rules. In the European Council for example, despite the introduction of majority-rule voting, decisions are still made by

consensus with very few exceptions.

In addition, the classical “intergovernmentalism” vs. “supranationalism” debate has become increasingly obsolete. The intertwining between the external sphere of sovereign states and the internal sphere of the EU has underlined the existence and necessary recognition of the “intermediate sphere of the member states”.ⁱⁱⁱ Merkel’s “Union method” is often interpreted as an intergovernmental method, although she **defined it** explicitly as “a combination of the community method and coordinated action by the member states.”^{iv} Furthermore, her speech came shortly after another speech delivered by the president of the European Council, H. Van Rompuy, in which he **argued** in the same vein that “often the choice is not between the Community method and the intergovernmental method, but between a coordinated European position and nothing at all”.^v

Finally, in the EU’s complex *sui generis* construction, the power of each state varies greatly depending on the topic discussed and to what extent it concerns a state. The personal capacities of the negotiators can also play an important role. Comparing power of the different EU member states is a challenging task, but also a fruitful one as it is likely to stimulate debate and help identify how the EU is evolving.

ⁱ Josef Janning, “State Power in European Integration – On the limits and context of Germany’s power in the Union”, *DGAPanalyse kompakt 1*, May 2013, <<https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/23743>>.

ⁱⁱ Eurostat, “GDP per capita in PPS” data from the 1st December 2012, <<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/tgm/table.do?tab=table&init=1&plugin=1&language=fr&pcode=tec00114>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ L. Van Middelaar, *Le passage à l’Europe. Histoire d’un commencement*, Paris, Gallimard, 2012.

^{iv} Speech by Federal Chancellor Angela Merkel at the opening ceremony of the 61st academic year of the College of Europe in Bruges on 2nd November 2010, College of Europe, <<http://www.coleurope.eu/content/news/Speeches/Europakolleg%20Brugge%20Mitschrift%20englisch.pdf>>.

^v Herman Van Rompuy, President of the European Council: Address given at Sciences-Po in Paris, 20th September 2010 “Not renationalization of European politics, but Europeanisation of national politics”, PCE 191/10, <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/ec/116691.pdf>.

Berlin benefits from size, and seeming consensus

Almut Möller

May 2013

“Who holds the power in Europe?” was the title of a seminar that I attended in a pleasant English countryside manor two years ago, just about a year after the Greek drama had started to unfold. From my German perspective on Europe this sounded like a rather odd way to frame the politics of the crisis. After all, there were more important issues to sort out. But who else if not the Brits had the credibility to convene such a meeting: they know about power, and never got anywhere as deep in its dark sides as did my country.

So asking the power question surrounded by remnants of Britannia’s old glory somewhat made sense. The question, to be fair, had a certain relevance. Who holds the power will shape the features of the new Union as it emerges from the crisis. Walking with fellow Europeans around the lakes of the soft hills of Oxfordshire with the daffodils in bloom felt, even for a German, like a safe place to ask questions about power.

Nevertheless, I was puzzled to learn that a good number of guests from across Europe were convinced that Berlin was where power lies in Europe, as early as spring 2011. It was not that I fundamentally disagreed. I was simply not used to discussing German power outside the context of the first half of the 20th century. As a good Europeanised German, I grew up with power being diluted in the federal structure of Germany and the institutions and procedures of “Brussels.” And, like perhaps many of my fellow Germans, I was and continue to be rather comfortable with both of these extra layers – after all, they had put the old question of German power to a rest. But there it was again!

Much of the debate on the “new German question” that started to unfold back in 2011 was initially inspired by the thinking in the [European Council on Foreign Relations](#)ⁱ. And in the months that followed, German power became its own strand of research on the European crisis, resulting in numerous articles and much commentary in Germany and abroad, including a set of [external views](#)ⁱⁱ on German power from other EU member states that the DGAP put together in 2012.

But, since then, discussions of power (or a lack thereof) have not focused exclusively on the German question. The debate has adopted a much wider scope, and there is still much research to be done on the new role of

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institutions such as the European Central Bank that moved centre stage in 2012; on opaque “financial markets” taking the driver’s seat with Europe’s future; on the role of parliaments who are failing to keep the pace with a flurry of European summits; on shifting power relations between (eurozone) core and (non-eurozone) periphery countries; or on the new power dynamics within the old Franco-German axis, and the new Polish-German nexus.

The politics of power is back with force, and the crisis has messed up many of the old assumptions about power in Europe. As Josef Janning argues in a [recent piece for IP Journal](#)ⁱⁱⁱ in which he puts forward his take on “power” in today’s European integration, sovereign power simply did not wither away in the EU. On the contrary, since 1989 we have seen a revival in the form of intergovernmental cooperation, “bringing back the asymmetries of size and weight as a structuring feature of political bargaining.” Needless to say: In the course of Europe’s crisis this has become as much an opportunity as a burden to Berlin’s policymakers.

With much of the European game being about economic strength combined with the need for imaginative institutional engineering over the past three years, Germany has been allowed to play the games it is best at. Imagine a situation in which Europe’s territorial integrity was challenged, and a robust military response was required from Europe’s democracies. Germany would still be counted among the big players, but it would be much more out of its comfort zone. France or Britain would quite naturally take the lead.

Playing to the power narrative that puts Germany centre stage is that “size matters” not only in Europe. It plays a key role in the international relations discourse in general. The narrative of international relations that has been shaped to a large extent around the rise of the Chinese or Indian “giants” over the last decade is all about “big is chic”. Yes, it is well established that in Europe all countries are small after all, but some are “more small” than others. In today’s mainstream globalisation narrative Europe’s patchwork of mostly small and medium-size countries does not work convincingly – with a few exceptions, Germany being one of them.

In the German context, the domestic constellation plays its part in the way German power is perceived: With Chancellor Merkel being quite literally unchallenged in her policies on Europe at home, Germany comes across as a rock-solid monolith. If the opposition parties were doing a better job in challenging the governing coalition, which they have thus far failed to do, Germany would perhaps be less perceived as a giant in the heart of Europe. But as things stand for now, from the outside there seems to be a full-on consensus across party lines on the overall course of the Merkel government. Germany comes across as the confident winner with a moralistic impetus to lecture others, and the power to get its ways.

As I argued in a [recent commentary](#)^{iv}, a lot remains to be understood and written on shifting power dynamics in Europe as a result of the crisis. At the moment there is a new European power game emerging that so far has not been fully understood by

governments and Europe's strategists. It is a wild mix of political colours and ideologies, of new institutional quarrels, of returning national pride, of the rising power of domestic constraints (which one might see as good news for democracy), of old balance-of-power thinking, of the shadow of history returning, of "ins," "pre-ins," and "outs" (of the eurozone). This power game is far more complex than those patterns that helped many of us understand the old order (most prominently the notion of the "Franco-German axis" or the predictability of a German drive for ever closer integration).

I argue that the real power is in understanding the new rules of this game – and answers to where the power ultimately lies in the "new" European Union might be found in surprising places. Since the European Single Act, the first major overhaul of the Treaties of Rome in 1987, European politics have been heavily focused on constitutional engineering in the narrow channels of "intergovernmental conferences": Maastricht, Amsterdam, Nice, the constitutional draft (with its prelude, the European Convention), and finally Lisbon. In Germany, this legalistic approach, always supported and shaped in proactive ways by successive German governments, was based heavily on administrative resources and legal expertise. With a traditional consensus among Germany's main parties on building an "ever closer Union," it was hardly surprising that meaningful challenge really only came from the Federal Constitutional Court. In 2009, the year in which the Lisbon Treaty entered into force, the Greek drama started to unfold. Since then, the nature of building the Union has changed quite fundamentally as it diffused to the wider arenas of politics in the member states. In the new Union, governments have to think much wider than just about the need to organise and shape alliances and majorities at the level of government representatives. They all have to be more responsive to their citizens than in the past – and a more politicised European game asks for more sophisticated strategies on behalf of those searching for power.

ⁱ Ulrike Guérot and Mark Leonard, "The new German Question: how Europe can get the Germany it needs", Policy Brief, April 2011, <http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR30_GERMANY_AW.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Almut Möller and Roderick Parkes, "Germany as Viewed by Other EU Member States", *EPIN Working Paper* 33, June 2012, <<https://dgap.org/en/think-tank/publications/further-publications/new-german-question>>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Josef Janning, "State Power in European Integration – On the limits and context of Germany's power in the Union", *DGAPanalyse kompakt* 1, May 2013, <<https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/23743>>.

^{iv} Almut Möller, "On Axes and Party Politics: the End of Europe's Predictability", 30th April 2013, <<http://euro.boellblog.org/2013/04/30/on-axes-and-party-politics-the-end-of-europes-predictability/>>.

For Warsaw, power means reaching its potential

Agata Gostyńska and Roderick Parkes
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Germans are ill at ease with their power. Who can blame them? Power means coercion, means danger, means rules. Those who dare acknowledge that Germany enjoys influence over those rules must quickly identify the rules that underpin that influence. No wonder they can get themselves into a [pickle](#).ⁱ

Happily, Polish policymakers find power less burdensome. Many of them would recognise Spinoza's distinction between power as *potestas* and power as *potentia* – the understanding that "power" can mean more than "might". It is a nuance recognised in the German *Macht* vs. *Kraft* and French, *puissance* vs. *pouvoir*.

The English language doesn't have this nuance, and the British struggle to pin down Poland: always on the watch for power shifts in the EU, they recently turned their attention to Warsaw. But while the researcher Nathaniel Copsy, writing for the England based Economic and Social Research Council, found plenty of evidence of Poland as a rising, dynamic [player](#),ⁱⁱ they couldn't pinpoint its influence in decision-making. London was perplexed.

The Polish conception of [power](#)ⁱⁱⁱ in the EU lies not in coercing and binding others but in achieving its potential – the catch-up element of Poland's EU policy that Josef Janning identifies. This conception was exemplified by Poland's clear enjoyment of its first stint at the helm of the EU Council, a role where honest-brokering trumps interest-representation.

If Poland ticks differently, then it is because it has been transformed by its association with the European Union, and because it sees more clearly than other member states the potential that can be transferred by the EU to other countries outside the bloc, and because it is acutely aware of the risks of having that potential snatched away.

Sadly, this falls on stony ground in an EU tied up with a sovereign debt crisis and a whole host of global challenges. In the debate on the bloc's multi-annual budget, for instance, Polish ministers toured European capitals calling for generous financial transfers. But their argument about the benefits of helping eastern members achieve their potential was met with polite

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incredulity.

The Polish conception, then, is rather unique. It is neither Germany's taming of power through mutual control and shared rulebooks, nor Britain's game of playing European powers off against each another. And it is certainly not the French vision of power: the glorification of the *grande nation* usually comes at the expense of those EU members playing catch-up in terms of economic development and institutional memory.

Still, Poland is acutely sensitive to the way these different understandings of power affect its own scope for development, especially the rather exclusive French way of handling problems. As such, Poles would probably add practical nuance to the general trends noted by Janning in his [essay](#)^{iv}, particularly in the area of eurozone policymaking.

Veto power may for instance generally be replacing coalition power, as Janning suggests, but the most decisive event of the past few years was the overriding of the British veto in December 2011 and the creation of a Fiscal Compact. This new intergovernmental platform provided an institutional architecture outside the EU treaties, tempting euro-members to form exclusive coalitions.

Yet, it also gave the rotating national presidency new life. The six-monthly national presidency may generally be in decline - as Josef Janning argues - but the Fiscal Compact has given a potential enforcement role to the Trio-Presidency as a means to make the enforcement of budgetary discipline more transparent and credible. In the context of eurozone governance, where situations of insiders and outsiders can emerge, the presidency format has received an unlikely upgrade as a guarantor of inclusiveness.

This is also reflected in the emerging debate about parliamentary control of eurozone affairs. A new interparliamentary forum dealing with EU defence has adopted the national presidency's logic of rotation, and with a similar parliamentary forum for economic affairs in the making, this precedent of giving all member states time in the chair is a useful argument against those who are keen that it comprises euro-area delegates only.

Similarly, supranational influence may be rather on the wane, as Janning argues. Yet, the recent rules strengthening the coordination of national economic policies actually gave the Commission greater competence in this sensitive area. If the Commission can secure stronger democratic legitimacy for itself then arguments about the need for narrowly intergovernmental solutions will be overcome, somewhat to the relief of Poland.

As for Janning's diagnosis of declining small- and medium-state power, there is a significant exception. London's conception of a balance of powers never took into account its [own self-marginalisation](#).^v With the UK now on the eurozone's sidelines,

member states that once relied on it – Sweden, the Netherlands, Poland – have become weightier and have begun to organise themselves into new constellations.

To this end, Poland has been increasingly active in building up the [Visegrad^{vi}](#) group, and the four participating Central European governments have shifted their focus from historically-loaded issues such as relations with Russia to economic and institutional questions, allowing Poland to emerge as something of a broker to the 2004 intake of members on eurozone issues.

This exception to Janning's general trend toward a marginalisation of "peripheral" member states has been welcomed by a Germany fearful of dominating others. Indeed, Guido Westerwelle made a point of having the Polish foreign minister, Radek Sikorski, involved in his Future of Europe Group. The Westerwelle report spawned a new term – the "pre-in".

This status underlines the right of states intending to join the euro to be involved in eurozone decisions. Eurozone political summits are open under certain conditions to non-eurozone members like Poland, as is the Supervisory Board of the Central Bank.

It all means that Poland has bucked any general trend towards marginalisation due to its status as a medium-sized, "peripheral," non-eurozone member. This has permitted a significant shift in its engagement in European affairs, under the most trying of circumstances.

Whereas five years ago, Warsaw was fighting for the maintenance of the Ioannina Compromise-type mechanisms that would have helped it to at least delay unwanted decisions, 2011 and 2012 saw it move to the forefront of member states driving forward reforms to take Europe out of its economic and political malaise.

Even if it is not always content about the form by which EU policies are adopted Poland perceives that these are generally conducive to its potential. In the ongoing discussion about the convergence and competitiveness instrument, for instance, Warsaw argues that support should be made available to structural reforms in non-euro members too.

But the price of success is constant vigilance, and Poland remains watchful of the power dynamics in the EU. Will euro members argue that the status of "pre-in" comes with duties as well as privileges? Will the Commission gain a taste for exclusive intergovernmental cooperation, if this boosts its powers? Just ask Warsaw.

ⁱ Jochen Bittner, Matthias Geis, Jörg Lau, Bernd Ulrich and Ronja von Wurmb-Seibel, "Germany's Dishonest Foreign Policy, Berlin does not want to intervene, but it does not hesitate to profit", <<https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/germanys-dishonest-foreign-policy>>, translated from "Wir tun doch nix", *Die Zeit*, 21st March 2013, <<http://www.zeit.de/2013/13/Deutschland-Aussenpolitik>>.

ⁱⁱ Nathaniel Copsey "Poland's Influence in the EU: the Case of its Eastern Policy", ESRC : London, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Andrew Rettman, "Poland: UK no longer a leading EU country", *EUObserver*, 25.01.2013,

<<http://euobserver.com/institutional/118849>>.

^{iv} Josef Janning, "State Power in European Integration – On the limits and context of Germany's power in the Union", *DGAPanalyse kompakt 1*, May 2013, <<https://dgap.org/en/article/getFullPDF/23743>>.

^v Report of the Polish Institute of International Affairs, "The Renegotiation Delusion? Nine Questions about Britain's EU future", May 2013, <www.pism.pl/files/?id_plik=13534>.

^{vi} Dariusz Karlan, "The Heart of a New North-South Axis? Joint infrastructure projects reconnect the Visegrad Four", 2nd October 2012, <<https://ip-journal.dgap.org/en/ip-journal/topics/heart-new-north-south-axis>>.