

The Time Is Now!

Why France and Germany need to push for a more tangible Europe

Since I took office as French Minister for European Affairs in March this year, Europe has not stopped making the headlines. This seems natural in European election years, but never before has the European project been challenged so much. Despite regular skirmishes about sovereignty and finance, it was always clear that we Europeans want to build a common future. The 2005 referenda in several member states on the constitutional treaty sent a warning, but Europe moved on. However, the present rise of voices which are hostile to Europe is without precedent.

One cause lies in globalization, which benefited development and the fight against poverty, but also brought about massive distortions, pressure on individuals, social systems and the environment. Global competition has become fierce, assertive powers such as Russia and China are on the rise, certainties such as the transatlantic relationship, the UN system, multilateralism and international law are being questioned, and trade wars threaten growth and employment.

Europe itself lost parts of its credibility, both in the wake of the financial crisis and through the fact that core values such as the rule of law and human rights are being disrespected across the European continent. The migration crisis has brought to light solidarity, but also exposed the weakness in Euro-



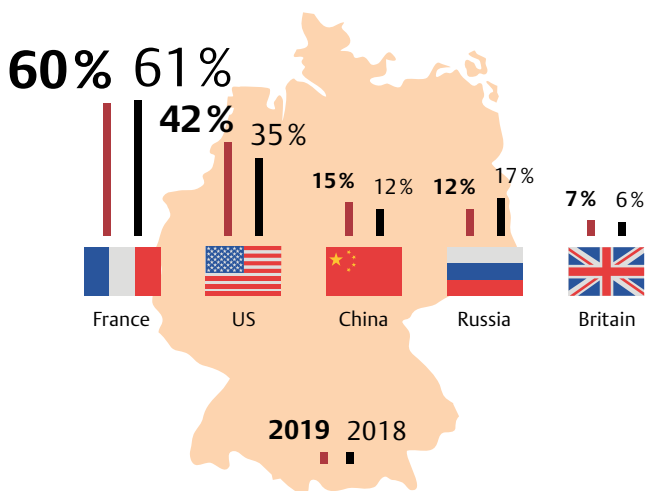
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pean policy-making. Right-wing populism has gained ground. Brexit has eaten up much of our diplomatic and administrative resources that could have been spent much better. As a consequence, we need to rebuild confidence in Europe. The time is now!

We already hold in our hands the means to do so. President Macron has made ambitious proposals for reshaping Europe in many policy areas from digital

Which country is Germany's most or second most important partner?



multiple answers possible

2019: a different country 18%, don't know 13%, no answer 2%

2018: a different country 7%, don't know 13%, no answer 2%

to social, and from asylum to police and defence cooperation. The German reaction was not explicitly enthusiastic – partly due perhaps to different decision-making processes and a “culture of consensus” in Germany, where building consensus requires time. While media reports of Franco-German dissonance abound, the fact that differences make us feel uneasy also demonstrates the fact that we care for each other.

As Secretary-General for Franco-German relations, I can only reaffirm the deep friendship and close cooperation between our two countries. Both the 2018 Meseberg Agreement and this year's Treaty of Aachen demonstrate that we are pushing ahead to find a common understanding and to set a European example. We are at a pivotal moment, going beyond reconciliation to build convergence. Paris and Berlin have agreed upon a number of concrete initiatives, from electro-mobility to trans-border cooperation, from our diplomatic Alliance for Multilateralism to defence cooperation. Certainly, there remains room for more: France will need to

enact structural reforms including public spending to regain competitiveness. Germany will need to increase its investments to return to a path of reliable growth and, by doing so, participate in the internal rebalancing of the Eurozone. However, the Franco-German relationship works well, as shown also by our projects and initiatives on defence and foreign affairs, and that is entirely good news for Europe!

At its core, Europe has always been a humanistic project. We need to highlight this core. We need to give people a perspective. What kind of Europe do we want to build, and why? In order to rebuild the link between politics and our respective populations, we need to consult the latter. The *grand débat national* in France and the *Bürgerdialog* in Germany were examples. There is a clear need for ambition – Europe needs to cope with the challenges of today's world, and it needs to act as one: We see this with digitalization, with Mercosur, with Iran, to name but a few. The need for decisive action on climate change is obvious, we simply cannot afford to further delay it.

Negotiating the next EU budget – a cornerstone of our collective action – will be another priority. It must better reflect citizens' priorities and bring about concrete and tangible results for the people. Transparency is key. We need to be able to show where, how, and why the EU is spending its money. We need to invest more in research and innovation, in education and mobility for the youth, in support for those in need, in ecological transition. And we must find a joint European answer to migration and integration.

For decades, Europe was taken for granted, grudgingly accepted, the object of many a joke ridiculing EU officials prescribing the shape of cucumbers. Now, people have collectively woken up to both the Union's importance and its fragility.

The new Commission, led by Ursula von der Leyen, will play a key role in achieving these goals. We will work together very closely, to make sure that Europe's decisions reach the everyday lives of its citizens. In French, I call this “L'Europe du concret”. Now that we have the team, we need the results. This will bring back confidence. ✖