

European interview

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# «No Member State, big or small, can face the present problems and challenges alone»

Interview with Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut, Ambassador to Germany in France.

**1. 25 years after its reunification Germany is now Europe's leading economic power and the centre of the enlarged Union. What impact have these developments had on Germany's European policy and on the dynamic behind European integration itself?**

There are two clearly different aspects to this question. The first is internal to the European Union, and especially to the euro zone in fact, where the crisis has brought to the fore that the times of traditional diplomacy are a thing of the past, since the domestic policies of our respective countries are converging toward a European internal policy which we all have to face, but in which the actions of some influence what the others do. The integration that is occurring de facto is stronger than it seems from the powers provided to the institutions by the Treaties. The second aspect is external. No Member State, big or small, France and Germany alike, can face the present problems and challenges alone. We might note some of these – the climate, with notably the Paris Conference (COP21) at the end of the year, and security issues, particularly in the Near East and even the refugees, many of whom are arriving from the Middle East. These external issues are of capital importance to us all. In an increasingly cross-border economy the European Union and its Member States

can face global competition only together. For Germany all of these internal and external developments mean that a solution must be found via Europe.

**2. From a domestic point of view the reunification of Germany has meant a great effort which the French underestimate or are not fully aware of: financial transfers, solidarity payments. Can we say that things are moving in the right direction domestically, are things now settled, or is there still work to do, notably for the Länder in the East where a few populist movements have now emerged?**

There is still work to do. But over the last few years, since Angela Merkel came to office as Chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, and because of her origins, Germany is at peace with itself as a reunified country. Reunification was crafted and undertaken under Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Now to a certain degree Germany is a new State. This does not mean that there are no day to day difficulties, that there is no North-South or East-West divergence, but there is a new feeling of belonging to a State that is complete. For the first time in Germany's history the country is confident; it is accepted by its populations and by its neighbours more than at any other previous time in Germany's history.

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**3. The history of European integration shows that Europe moves forward with joint decisions, and the ability to decide on a European level notably depends on the closeness of the French and German positions. Over the last few years, controversy, mutual criticism and even the quest of other alliances seem to have periodically marred the cohesion of the Franco-German couple. What typifies the present state of relations between France and Germany?**

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If I look back over the last 25 years there have always been times when explanation was necessary. A joint position between France and Germany has never just fallen quite naturally from the heavens, but every time work and political will were required for it to become a reality. We saw this with the Maastricht Treaty and on several occasions since then. The vital thing about the Franco-German engine is the shared determination to find joint solutions. That determination is there and it is possibly even stronger than a few years ago. This in itself cannot replace the need to find a solution. At the beginning of negotiations the French and German points of view are not necessarily or spontaneously the same, but the work to come together and find a joint decision has to be done because the political determination, the belief of the French and German leaders, beyond political differences, is that agreement between France and Germany is a vital precondition for any progress in Europe. In a European Union of 28 it is still a vital precondition but it is no longer an adequate condition for a European agreement. We also have to work with other States. The Franco-German couple must sometimes know when to step back and acknowledge that the solution, especially if it has been difficult to find between ourselves, cannot be spontaneously accepted by everyone without a minimum amount of explanation, without working with the others, without being prepared to integrate their point of view in coming to a European solution. This work is ongoing. If you look at relations between the German and French leaders over the last few decades almost every time you can see that there have been periods of getting to know how the other functions.

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**4. What in your opinion are the future important issues to be addressed to strengthen the European Union in which France and Germany should take joint initiative?**

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There are three main issues which can each be divided into a multitude of questions. Firstly strengthening monetary union, the euro. This will probably be central to France's and Germany's expectations over the next few years. Secondly there is the issue of relations with our neighbours in the east, notably the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Europe has developed a Neighbourhood Policy, but in a way it has buried its head in the sand. It forgot that its neighbours in the East themselves had neighbours. We have to build a neighbourhood policy and help settle the conflict between Ukraine and Russia. Thirdly there is the refugee question, which comprises three aspects: the reception of those arriving in Europe in line with our values and our laws, the organisation and protection of the external border and work with countries of origin and transit. Diplomatic work must also attempt to appease the conflicts that are the cause of these migratory flows.

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**5. Will the question of the UK be the focus of close work between France and Germany? There are possibly European solutions to some problems, and there are some fundamental problems such as Monetary Union and free movement.**

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Undoubtedly we must adopt a joint approach. A diplomatic solution has to be found which is acceptable to the Europeans and presentable for the British government when the referendum takes place. Finding a solution still entails a certain amount of work and for the time being the British government is relatively careful with public demands. Any future solution still requires calm and thoughtful work. But obviously there are intangible principles that we cannot put into question such as the free movement of people or non-discrimination. The European Court of Justice has also opened up some space for the attribution of social rights to those who move to another Member State. Of course there is a certain amount of national leeway.

Every demand will have to be considered carefully and we have to ensure that a solution, for example within the single market, does not benefit the British more than it does the others.

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**6. Due to the crisis many taboos have been lifted regarding the organisation of the euro zone: budgetary federalism and bank union in particular. To what extent is the German government in favour of further progress towards greater political integration of the euro zone? And if so via which methods and how?**

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In many speeches delivered to the Bundestag the Chancellor has pointed out that the development of a more integrated euro zone is necessary if we are to learn from the crisis. Three issues must be addressed: economic coordination against a backdrop of economic policies and their impact on the functioning of the single currency. We also have to address financial solidarity. Finally, the issue of better governance between States, with greater involvement on the part of the parliaments, is necessary to strengthen democratic legitimacy and for the emergence of new procedures. To this end we must first define what we want to do. Once that has been done we can always find the appropriate legal and institutional formula to make it a reality. Before addressing organisation and legal structure I would prefer to come to a synthesis of the fundamentals of the issues we have mentioned.

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**7. Is it possible also to address an issue that has been the focus of discussion regarding fiscal harmony, possibly even of taxes between France and Germany?**

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Work was undertaken during the Presidency of Nicolas Sarkozy between France and Germany which we called the "Green Paper" on corporate tax base. The comparison has been made. Now there is a situation in which, in a political perspective, each rapprochement of the corporate tax base between France and Germany automatically leads, either in France or Germany, to a reduction or an increase in taxation, which implies difficult decisions.

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**8. Regarding the refugee crisis, Germany registered nearly one third of asylum requests in 2014 and the German authorities have announced that they are prepared to receive 800,000 people, even a million, which is more than 1% of the population. At the same time not all the Member States seem to play the game, which has led to a confidence crisis and even a crisis of values within the Union. How do we respond to this?**

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These figures indicate the possible numbers of asylum seekers in Germany, which is not necessarily the number of people obtaining a residence permit to stay in Germany after their case has finally been assessed. For example, of the number of people having requested asylum last year about one third obtained a residence permit, most of which are temporary for humanitarian reasons, and only a small number were granted one by virtue of asylum rights. The first issue is making the entire mechanism work to ensure that those who do not have the right to a residence permit can leave the country. This presupposes that asylum requests in Europe are addressed in principle by the country of entry. This is an enormous challenge not only for Germany but also for the whole of Europe since it means defining and establishing a common migratory policy. Indeed we are facing an enormous challenge and a great deal of progress has to be made. Europe has to understand that we must manage solidarity over time and in its various dimensions. Solidarity must therefore be multiple. If this is not the case there will be a problem of coherence across the entire European Union. This refugee issue is affecting many people more directly than certain other issues, and so it is a question of great political importance.

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**9. What explanation can you give to the differing points of view between European countries on this issue?**

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There is more than one country which has not done what is needed to receive the refugees, to register them, to define minimum standards of treatment. In certain cases there has been "a race to the bottom" to

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discourage asylum seekers and migrants from coming to one country or another. If Europe has common rules, then they have to be applied. The way we experienced the situation in Hungary and the way people were treated at a given time led the German government to open its borders on humanitarian grounds to a group of people in Hungary. This is an important detail but not the only one.

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**10. Given its influence in Europe voices have been raised asking Germany to take more responsibility in terms of foreign policy and defence. Can you present developments that have taken place in Germany over the last few years in the international diplomatic arena as well as the role played by Berlin in managing the Russian-Ukrainian crisis? And also what changes can be expected in the future in these areas?**

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German diplomacy has not just worked on Ukraine but it has also been involved to find solutions in the negotiations with Iran. Work with Iran lasted ten years. With Ukraine we are in the second year. It is a complex issue in which the Chancellor and also the Foreign Minister have invested an enormous amount of time and political capital, often speaking with their French counterparts and also with the Russians and the Ukrainians to bring them towards a negotiated solution. Indeed Germany is

convinced that this conflict can only be resolved via diplomatic means. The military solution has been ruled out.

Due to circumstances Germany has taken part in more military missions than we might think, of course we have not always been on the front line, because of domestic procedures which require a vote in the Bundestag. From Afghanistan to Mali Germany has contributed in its own way, in accordance with its Constitution, towards international efforts. Thus, there has been debate recently in Germany about arming the Peshmerga in Iraq, which is completely contrary to all German political doctrines of arms control and participation in conflict. Maybe developments have not been as spectacular as some might hope or want, but they have been major over a five to ten year period and the situation will continue to develop.

Germany has integrated into its logic that in the end solutions are political or diplomatic. In certain circumstances military intervention and support are necessary. But the aim is always to come to a political solution. This is the only way for situations to stabilise durably. There have been some political solutions which were such artificial compromises that they did not hold. But it will always be toward this type of solution that German diplomacy will try to progress.

It is clear, as in Ukraine or Iran, that European co-ordination is necessary. Converging points of view and common Franco-German goals are key to taking matters forward.

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