

FRANCE AND GERMANY IN THE REFUGEE CRISIS: UNITED IN DIVERSITY?



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The first session of the Think Tanks Tandem¹ initiative was held at the Vaux-de-Cernay Abbey near Paris. It was attended by some forty representatives of German and French think tanks as well as German, French and EU authorities. The first round table addressed the issue of migration policy while the second was devoted to the fight against Islamist terrorism.

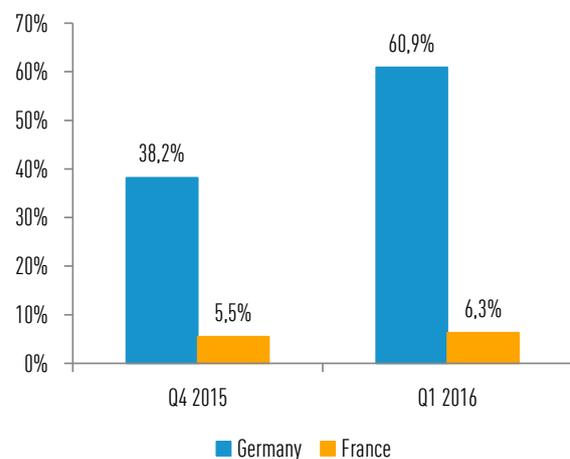
The first round table was introduced by Marc-Olivier Padis, Director of Studies with Terra Nova, and Stefan Dehnert, Director of the Paris Bureau of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. Numerous German and French experts intervened (see list in Appendix). This synthesis endeavours to summarise the main analyses and recommendations resulting from the exchange of French and German views on migration policy, identifying both points of divergence and convergence.

1. Different situations and perceptions

The debate brought the difference of national perceptions of the refugee crisis to the fore. These differences are first and foremost due to the very different situations in Germany and France. In Germany, the year 2015 beat all previous records in terms of the migrant influx. In 2015, over one-third of all first-time asylum seekers in Europe submitted their application in Germany. France did not have to face that kind of challenge. Only about 6% of all asylum seekers submitted their initial application in France.

This gap still increased in the first quarter of 2016. While the proportion of asylum seekers in France remained relatively stable, two-thirds of all asylum applications in the EU were submitted in Germany, which was roughly ten times more than in France (see figure 1).

FIGURE 1 ► Share of first-time asylum applications in the EU



Source : Eurostat, 2016.

As several of the French participants stressed, the migrants simply “voted with their feet” and opted for Germany. From a French point of view, this “vote” was strongly influenced by the German chancellor’s welcoming policy. It was argued that this policy should not solely be seen as a display of altruism, but also in light of Germany’s demographic development and of a clear shortage of skilled labour in the country.

The German participants, on the other hand, underscored the humanitarian dimension of the policy, which has also translated into a major involvement on the part of civil society. They added that the massive influx bound for Germany was not solely triggered by the chancellor's policy, but by a whole range of pull factors. Those include Germany's favourable economic situation and the comparatively high financial contributions for those benefiting from protection.

The differences in perception between Germany and France were also traced back to semantic differences. In Germany people talk about a "refugee crisis" in Europe. The concept of "refugee" suggests an empathetic link to the crisis that is also grounded in Germany's history. In France, on the other hand, people rather tend to talk about a "migration crisis", thus amalgamating different categories of migrants. Unlike the German word "Flüchtling" the French word "réfugié" also places a stronger focus on the receiving country in its capacity as a "refuge" or shelter than on the person seeking shelter.

2. Different European policy priorities

According to the participants, these differences also point towards different priorities concerning EU policy. Germany has been making an effort to find common solutions to the refugee crisis since 2015, but its activism has frequently been interpreted as a unilateral approach by other member states. The prime example was the September 2015 decision by the German Government to temporarily suspend the Dublin rules for Syrian asylum-seekers. The negotiations on the agreement with Turkey were also initially interpreted as a unilateral German initiative.

Meanwhile, in France, the focus was more on the security dimension due to repeated terrorist attacks in the country. Thus the demand for European solidarity has been higher in the domain of security than in the field of migration. The French participants also argued that the country's active role in foreign and security policy (particularly in connection with the military struggle against the Islamic State) should be seen as a contribution to addressing the root causes of the migrant exodus.

3. Common challenges

Despite their different priorities, Germany and France face at least two common challenges. The first is the tendency of eurosceptic or europhobic populist forces to draw political capital out of the refugee crisis in the domestic political arena. Right-wing populism is particularly prone to resort to this issue as immigration and borders touch the very heart of national identity and sovereignty respectively. Right-wing political groupings are bringing considerable pressure to bear in the run-up to the 2017 general elections in both France and Germany.

The second challenge concerns the chasm opening up between Eastern and Western Europe over European migration policy. The Visegrad countries are rejecting binding measures to establish solidarity in connection with the migration issue in Europe. The refugee or migrant crisis may therefore fuel a lasting division between the EU member states and societies.



4. Joint efforts to counter tendencies of fragmentation

The participants agreed that France and Germany should be united in the struggle against this trend towards increased fragmentation. Despite their different perceptions, the two countries have already put in place a number of common measures. For instance, in the context of the Franco-German Ministerial Council of 2016, a proposal was formulated to set up a Franco-German integration council in order to facilitate an exchange of experience.

The participants underscored that this dialogue should not be conducted in a top-down fashion. It should take its inspiration from the experience with the German Conference on Islam (*Deutsche Islamkonferenz*) and involve civil society players from both countries to ensure that transnational exchange takes place at various levels. Politicians should then disseminate the lessons learnt to their respective grass-roots opinion in a differentiated manner and counter populist distortions in a targeted fashion.

At the same time, a degree of convergence between France and Germany can be observed in connection with the external aspects of migration policy. Both countries have an interest in better controlling the migrant influx. They were also in agreement when it came to strengthening the protection of Europe's external borders and thus creating a European Border and Coast Guard. Germany and France are

also aware of the fact that the EU should pool its diplomatic and civilian resources to a far greater extent if it is to tackle the root causes of migration and support the countries of origin and transit.

The two countries might even draw closer together in the military sphere in the future. Germany is aware of the fact that it needs to engage more in the stabilisation of the arc of crises around Europe and particularly at its Southern rim. The recent debate in the country on its international responsibility also suggests that this comprehensive stabilisation effort might also include more German military contributions in the future.

The migration theme is going to play an important role on the European agenda in the next few years and indeed over the coming decades. Lasting conflicts and crises, the demographic trend in Africa, the consequences of climate change and the existing possibilities in the fields of communication and mobility suggest that Europe is going to remain a prime destination for both humanitarian and economic migrants.

Germany and France must therefore take the lead and push the EU to think beyond the current crisis. The aim should be to move from reactive crisis management to a more preventive and forward-looking approach based on a set of common European rules and tools. If France and Germany manage to go beyond their bilateral differences, they can pave the way for a sustainable pan-European approach.



1. The European Union is going through an existential crisis calling for a reinforced mobilisation of participants of the public debate in Germany and France. A process of work meetings called "Think Tanks Tandem" was launched, bringing together the main German and French think tanks who are active in the field of European issues. They use their expert capacities and freedom of analysis and tone to clarify and dissipate tensions which can impede the proper functioning of the "Franco-German engine" and contribute to the relaunch of European construction in 2017.

APPENDIX - LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

- **Alexander Abel**, Adviser, cabinet of the Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth, Auswärtiges Amt
- **Élisabeth Ardaillon-Poirier**, Principal Adviser, EPSC (European Political Strategy Centre)
- **Katharina Barié**, Project Manager, Bertelsmann Stiftung
- **Alice Baudry**, Project Manager, Institut Montaigne
- **Yves Bertoncini**, Director, Institut Jacques Delors
- **Laurent Bigorgne**, Director, Institut Montaigne
- **Amandine Clavaud**, Project Manager Europe, Fondation Jean Jaurès
- **Stefan Dehnert**, Director of the Paris office, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- **Stefan Delfs**, Adviser, Planungsstab, Auswärtiges Amt
- **Claire Demonchy**, Deputy Chief of staff, cabinet of the Minister of state for European affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Harlem Désir**, Minister of state for European affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Mathilde Durand**, Project Manager Germany and editor, Jacques Delors Institute
- **Kristina Eichhorst**, Coordinator for crisis and Conflict Management, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
- **Gilles Finchelstein**, Director, Fondation Jean Jaurès
- **Joschka Fischer**, Former Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs and Former Vice-Chancellor
- **Clémentine Forissier**, Editor in chief, Contexte
- **Fabian Forni**, Chief of staff, cabinet of the Minister of state for European affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Sarah Fröb**, Director of European affairs, magazine Paris-Berlin
- **Nino Galetti**, Director of the Paris office, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
- **Marcel Grignard**, President, Confrontations Europe
- **Jean-Paul Guihaumé**, Deputy Director for Germany and Alps and Adriatic regions, European Union Department, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Julie Hamann**, Project manager France/Franco-German relations, DGAP
- **Isabelle Jégouzo**, Head of the Representation, Representation of the European Commission in Paris
- **Pascale Joannin**, General director, Fondation Robert Schuman
- **Gilles de Kerchove**, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator
- **Guillaume Klossa**, Founding President, EuropaNova
- **Nicole Koenig**, Research Fellow, Jacques Delors Institut – Berlin
- **Martin Koopmann**, Executive Director, Genshagen Stiftung
- **Manuel Lafont Rapnouil**, Director, ECFR Paris
- **Maxime Lefebvre**, Ambassador in charge of a mission, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Christophe Leonzi**, Deputy Director, European Union Department, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Pierre Lévy**, Director, European Union Department, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Anne Macey**, General Delegate, Confrontations Europe
- **Nikolaus Meyer-Landrut**, Ambassador of the Federal Republic of Germany in France
- **Lena Morozova**, Development Director, EuropaNova
- **Sven Mossler**, Former Deputy General Secretary for Franco-German Cooperation, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Marc-Olivier Padis**, Study Director, Terra Nova
- **Yves Pascouau**, Associate Research Fellow, Jacques Delors Institute
- **Jean-Christophe Ploquin**, Editor in chief, La Croix
- **Philipp Sälthoff**, Senior Project Manager, Das Progressive Zentrum
- **Stéphane Saurel**, Cabinet Director of the Minister of state for European affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Stefan Seidendorf**, Deputy Director, Franco-German Institute in Ludwigsburg
- **Nicolas Séjour**, Former Adviser for speeches, studies and prospects by the Minister of state for European affairs, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Hans Stark**, Director, Cerfa (Ifri)
- **Justin Vaisse**, Director of the Centre for Analysis, Planning and Strategy, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Development
- **Daniela Vincenti**, Editor of chief, EurActiv.com

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