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# The Franco-German Rivalry in the Post-Brexit European Union

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## ABSTRACT

A significant foundation of European stability after World War II has been the balance of power between the United Kingdom (UK), France, and Germany. The UK's accession to the European Communities (EC) in 1973 had carried that 'balance' into the EC's institutional framework. In this regard, the UK's withdrawal from EU structures may lead to an important political and financial vacuum at the center of the Union. In the wake of Brexit, indications of anxiety and concerns about power imbalances have emerged around the question of which country or countries will steer the Union. There exit fresh post-Brexit assessments that indicate that the UK's departure from the EU may catalyze the differences between Germany and France. This paper will discuss three essential scenarios for the EU's political and economic future direction, namely, French leadership, German leadership, and a Franco-German partnership, for the post-Brexit period.

**Keywords:** Brexit, European Union, Power Struggle, France, Germany

## Brexit Sonrası Avrupa Birliğinde Alman-Fransız Rekabeti

### ÖZET

İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra Avrupa'nın istikrarının temellerinden birini Birleşik Krallık'ın, Fransa ve Almanya arasındaki güç dengesi oluşturmaktaydı. Birleşik Krallık'ın 1973'te Avrupa Toplulukları'na (AT) katılması, söz konusu dengeyi, AT'nin kurumsal çerçevesi içine taşımıştı. Bu bağlamda, Britanya'nın Birlikten ayrılması Avrupa Birliği'nin (AB) merkezinde siyasi ve finansal anlamda büyük boşluklar oluşmasına yol açabilir. Brexit gerçekleşirken, Birliğe hangi ülkenin / ülkelerin yön vereceği sorusu etrafında bir gerilimin ve güç dengesizliği endişesinin işaretleri ortaya çıkmaktadır. Britanya'nın AB'den ayrılmasının, Almanya ve Fransa arasındaki farkları açığa çıkaracağı şeklinde yorumlar yapılmaktadır. Brexit sonrası dönemde AB'nin geleceğine ilişkin; Fransız liderliği, Alman liderliği ve Fransız-Alman ortaklığı şeklinde ifade edilebilecek üç ana senaryonun öne çıkabileceği tartışılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Brexit, Avrupa Birliği, Güç Mücadelesi, Fransa, Almanya

## Introduction

On January 31, 2020, a member state left the European Union (EU) for the first time in its history. Many unprecedented crises—Eurozone problem, a sovereign debt crisis, the increase in populist movements, etc.—have called into question the foundations of European integration. However, the Brexit referendum was a turning point in the EU’s history and raised serious doubts about the future sustainability of the EU integration. European integration is beyond economic and trade cooperation and can be considered as being derived from a political union. Hence, the formation of “an ever-closer union” was regarded as the basis of the integration process since the establishment of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1957.<sup>1</sup>

The UK’s exit from the EU prompted a debate on the likelihood of differentiated integration within the Union. Differentiated integration has been a long-standing concept and discussed in different ways in the existing literature. Although a common definition does not exist in the general literature, it is mainly considered as an institutional response to the incremental heterogeneity of member state preferences.<sup>2</sup> Majone argues that “an important lesson [from the crisis] concerns the limits of the one-size-fits-all approach to integration” and emphasizes that “the level of socioeconomic heterogeneity in the enlarged Union.”<sup>3</sup> He also states that “if countries have significantly different needs and hence different national priorities, the policies that maximize aggregate welfare ought to be different rather than harmonized.”<sup>4</sup> In this regard, Brexit has resulted in a renewed interest in the principle of differentiated integration and its possible outcomes for the European project.

As a result of Brexit, the EU slogan of “ever closer union” clearly took a major hit.<sup>5</sup> Brexit means a loss of size, momentum, reach, and stability, and contests the understanding that “working together makes Europeans stronger.”<sup>6</sup> According to some commenters, many British people who voted to leave considered the EU a sinking ship that needed to be abandoned.<sup>7</sup> In addition, for some scholars, the absence of the UK’s influence in Brussels may test the EU’s existing commitment to fiscal responsibility, free trade, and enlargement -issues traditionally supported by the UK.<sup>8</sup>

Since the first years of its conception, the EU has witnessed rivalries among its members. The conflict between French and German positions regarding economic policies already existed in 1980s. When the disputes regarding the first unsuccessful attempt to establish an Economic and Monetary Union in Europe were present, Germany and France disagreed over the way of introducing a single currency.<sup>9</sup> While the French government advocated for immediate monetary integration,

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- 1 “The Treaty of Rome”, 25 March 1957, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/treaty-of-rome> (Accessed 18 December 2020).
  - 2 Frank Schimmelfennig, “EU enlargement and differentiated integration: discrimination or equal treatment?”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 21, No 5, 2014, p. 681-698.
  - 3 Giandomenico Majone, “Rethinking European Integration after the Debt Crisis”, *UCL European Institute*, June 2012, [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/drupal/site\\_european-institute/sites/european-institute/files/working-paper-debt-crisis.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/drupal/site_european-institute/sites/european-institute/files/working-paper-debt-crisis.pdf) (Accessed 04 October 2020).
  - 4 *Ibid*, p. 8–9.
  - 5 Stephen M. Walt, “Europe’s Post-Brexit Future is Looking Scary”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 February 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/02/06/europes-post-brexit-future-is-looking-scary/> (Accessed 18 April 2020)
  - 6 Sohrab Ahmari, “Two losses for trans-Atlantic twits: Brexit finally happens, impeachment collapses”, *New York Post*, 30 January 2020, <https://nypost.com/2020/01/30/two-losses-for-transatlantic-twits-brexit-finally-happens-impeachment-collapses/> (Accessed 12 May 2020).
  - 7 Rosa Balfour, “The European Union after Brexit: reform or shrivel”, *Encompass*, February 2020, <https://encompass-europe.com/comment/the-european-union-after-brexit-reform-or-shrivel>, (Accessed 12 May 2020).
  - 8 Simon Bulmer, “Germany and the European Union: Post-Brexit Hegemon”, *Insight Turkey*, Vol. 20, No 3, 2018, p. 11-28.
  - 9 “One Currency for One Europe: The road to the Euro”, European Commission, [https://ec.europa.eu/economy\\_](https://ec.europa.eu/economy_)

Germany believed that monetary integration could be achieved if there was a high-level economic convergence among participants. After a strong German surplus position emerged in the late 1980s, Paris supported a system of asserting political control of the economy or “economic governance.”<sup>10</sup> As a counter, Germany argued for an independent-minded central bank without political interference.<sup>11</sup>

However, prior to Brexit, the conflicting positions of France and Germany in terms of economic policies had been balanced by the inclusion of the UK. Balancing role of the UK was persistent from the beginning of its membership. While the UK had wanted to join the EEC, Britain’s commonwealth ties and close relations with the United States prevented it from joining the Community. Britain’s application was vetoed by the French President in 1963 and in 1967.<sup>12</sup> However, the conditions changed for France when Germany experienced a rapid economic recovery in the late 1960s and pursued an active policy towards the East. Since the European balance of power was shifting in favor of West Germany, France shifted its position and accepted British accession to the EEC as a counterweight to West Germany. Hence, the UK became a member in 1973.

The lack of a leader has emerged as grounds to question the legitimacy of the Union on an international scale. Now, amid uncertainty regarding the future of the EU considering Brexit, the power struggle between Germany and France has also come to light. This article aims to analyze how the power dynamics within the EU will be affected by the exit of the UK and to scrutinize the implications of the leadership scenarios of the Union in the future.

Accordingly, for the post-Brexit period, this article explores three possible scenarios for the future of the EU: French leadership, German leadership, and Franco-German partnership. The first section will discuss the UK’s significant role in foreign and security policy making and the general consequences of its departure from the Union for EU policies and politics. The second and third sections will respectively analyze the scenarios of French and German leadership in post-Brexit Europe together with their political positions. The fourth section will scrutinize the possibility of Franco-German partnership after Brexit by analyzing whether Brexit creates a power vacuum in the EU. The last section offers concluding remarks that strive to forecast what is in store regarding the political legitimacy of the EU in the future.

## **Brexit’s Repercussions for the EU Policies and Politics**

Historically, the UK has played a significant role in the creation of the EU’s foreign and security policy, balancing France and Germany. Prior to the UK’s membership in the EEC, existing member states had only introduced European Political Cooperation (EPC) regarding foreign policy, which gained effectiveness after the UK joined.<sup>13</sup> The EEC was not an actor in defence area after the failure of establishing a European Defence Community (EDC) in 1954. Member states considered NATO as their common defence organization.<sup>14</sup>

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finance/publications/pages/publication6730\_en.pdf (Accessed 21 February 2021).

10 Harold James, *Making the European Monetary Union: The Role of the Committee of Central Bank Governors and the Origins of the European Central Bank*, Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012.

11 Ibid.

12 “The EEC and Britain’s late entry”, *The National Archives*, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/eec-britains-late-entry.htm> (Accessed 23 December 2020).

13 “Common Foreign and Security Policy”, EUR-Lex, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/HTML/?uri=LEGISUM:a19000&from=DE> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

14 Ibid.

The December 1998 Anglo-French summit in Saint-Malo is considered to be the beginning of the European defence project.<sup>15</sup> Then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair and the French President Jacques Chirac agreed to improve greater EU defence capabilities, and the ‘Saint-Malo Process’ can be considered a significant step toward the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) of the EU.

Similar to Saint-Malo, another initiative achieved through Franco-British cooperation within the framework of the CSDP occurred at the Le Touquet Summit in 2003. France and the UK invoked European governments to increase their defence spending in order to narrow the equipment gap between EU member states. Paris and London also asked for the establishment of a new EU defence agency with the aim of encouraging member states to enhance their military capabilities.

Another significant development in European foreign and security policy happened in 2003 under British leadership when the UK played a crucial role by suggesting “structured cooperation,” i.e., a coalition of militarily developed countries, as a principle of EU defence policy.

The leadership of the UK was also apparent at the 2003 Berlin Summit where French, British, and German leaders accepted that “the European Union should be endowed with a joint capacity to plan and conduct operations without recourse to NATO resources and capabilities.”<sup>16</sup> At this summit, the cooperation of the big three enhanced the EU’s defence policy; all were aware that any plans regarding defence were essentially meaningless without the UK.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, Brexit will have an impact on European foreign policy, considering that the EU loses a significant global security player. According to the House of Lords EU Committee, the UK’s contribution to the CSDP has been limited to just 2.3% of the personnel engaged in EU missions.<sup>18</sup> However, the UK was one of the few member states with ‘full-spectrum’ military capabilities and is one of only six NATO member states fulfilling its goal of spending 2% of its gross domestic product on defence.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Brexit will obviously result in a reduction of Europe’s security and defence capability. The UK has contributed considerable financial support to EU missions. According to a House of Commons Briefing Paper in 2016, the UK shared 14.8% of eligible common costs in EU military operations.<sup>20</sup> As stated by the Foreign Office to a European Union Committee report in February 2016, London provided nearly 16% of the CFSP budget for civilian missions.<sup>21</sup> The UK is an important contributor of personnel to EU missions. According to 2012 statistics, it provided 4.19% of total mission personnel from EU member states.<sup>22</sup> In addition, as it is seen in Table 1 below, the UK had a significant role in providing spending, equipment and expertise to EU missions and operations. In this regard, the UK’s withdrawal will weaken EU missions.<sup>23</sup>

15 Maartje Rutten, “From St. Malo to Nice-European defence: core documents”, *Institute for Security Studies*, May 2001, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/cp047e.pdf>, p. 8 (Accessed 29 September 2020).

16 Honor Mahony, “EU governments to tackle defence issues” *EU Observer*, <https://euobserver.com/news/13052> (Accessed 29 September 2020).

17 Ibid.

18 “Brexit: Common Security and Defence Policy Missions and Operations”, *House of Lords European Union Committee*, 18 May 2018, <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201719/ldselect/ldecom/132/132.pdf> (Accessed 11 March 2020).

19 “UK-EU Future Relationship: defence and security cooperation”, *Institute for Government*, 25 February 2020, <https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/explainers/future-relationship-defence-security-cooperation> (Accessed 11 March 2020).

20 “House of Commons Library, Brexit: Impact Across Policy Areas”, Briefing Paper, No. 07213, 26 August 2016, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7213/> Accessed (21 December 2020).

21 House of Lords European Union Committee, “Europe in the World: Towards a More Effective EU Foreign and Security Strategy”, HL 97, Eight Report of Session 2015–16, 16 February 2016, Appendix 5, Table 2, pp. 81–84.

22 Federico Santopinto and Megan Price (eds.), *National Visions of EU Defence Policy: Common Denominators and Misunderstandings*, Brussels: CEPS, 2013.

23 Walt, “Europe’s Post-Brexit Future is Looking Scary.”

**Table 1: UK Contributions to CSDP Military Operations<sup>24</sup>**

Name of the Operation	Summary	Dates	Number of Total Personnel	UK Personnel	Total Annual Budget	UK Contribution to Military Common Funding
<b>EUFOR ALTHEA</b>	Capacity building and armed forces training of Bosnia and Herzegovina	2004-2016	803	1 Intermediate Reserve Company (120 personnel); 6 staff officers	€14.1 million	€2.2 million
<b>EUNAVFOR Atalanta</b>	Protection to World Food Program vessels in Somalia, deterring and disrupting piracy and armed robbery at sea	2008-2016	c.1051	Hosting Operational HQ (Northwood); Operation Commander and core OHQ personnel	€7.4 million	€1.2 million
<b>EUTM Somalia</b>	Reinforcing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and the institutions of Somalia.	2010-2016	171	1 Logistics Officer; 1 Military Assistant to Somali Chief of Defence; 1 civilian security sector reform adviser	€1.3 million	€1.8 million
<b>EUTM Mali</b>	Training and military advising to the Malian armed forces	2013-2016	578	3 force HQ staff; 27 training team personnel; 2 civilian humanitarian law trainers	€15 million	€2.4 million
<b>EUNAVFOR MED Sophia</b>	Contributing to disruption of human-smuggling and trafficking networks in the Mediterranean	2015-2016	1,137	2 Royal Navy vessels; Core OHQ staff	€7.5 million	€1.2 million
<b>EUPOL Afghanistan</b>	Providing support to the Afghan government to constitute sustainable & effective civilian policing	2007-2016	168	1	€57.75 million	€9.24 million
<b>EUBAM Rafah, Palestinian Territories</b>	Border assistance and monitoring at the Rafah crossing point on the Gaza-Egypt border	2005-2016	6	0	€1.27 million	€0.2 million
<b>EUPOL COPPS, OPTs</b>	Supporting the establishment of sustainable and effective policing arrangements under Palestinian ownership	2005-2016	50	2	€9.18 million	€1.5 million
<b>EULEX Kosovo</b>	Rule of law mission to provide monitoring, mentoring and advise to national authorities re police, justice and customs	2008-2016	754	18	€77 million	€12.3 million
<b>EUMM Georgia</b>	Monitoring compliance with 2008 six-point plan agreement between Georgia and Russia	2008-2016	201	11	€18.3 million	€2.9 million
<b>EUAM Ukraine</b>	Contributing to the creation of efficient, sustainable and accountable civilian security services	2014-2016	87	4	€13.1 million	€2.1 million
<b>EUSEC RD Congo</b>	Giving advice and assistance on defence reform in the Democratic Republic of Congo	2005-2016	10	2	€2.7 million	€0.4 million
<b>EUBAM Libya</b>	Providing support for the Libyan administration to develop capacity for improvement of security of Libya's land, sea and air borders	2013-2016	3	1	€26.2 million	€4.2 million

<sup>24</sup> UK Parliament, "Common Security and Defence Policy Missions", [https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/97/9714.htm#\\_idTextAnchor149](https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldselect/ldcom/97/9714.htm#_idTextAnchor149) (Accessed 12 December 2020).

The UK has also been a net contributor to the EU budget. Its economy is bigger than that of 18 member countries (including Ireland, Denmark, Finland, Czech Republic, Romania, Portugal, Greece, Hungary, Slovak Republic, Luxembourg, Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Cyprus and Malta) combined.<sup>25</sup> In this regard, the UK's departure dramatically affects the EU's economy. Britain's departure from the Union leaves a 75-billion Euro deficit in the bloc's finances.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, Brexit will have an effect on the relationship between the member states in the Eurozone as well as those outside it. As a result of the UK's departure, the member states outside the Eurozone will lose a key coalition partner, and they may be relegated to second-class status following a deeper integration.<sup>27</sup> Hence, it will make non-Eurozone member states like Poland, Sweden and Denmark more vulnerable.

According to Article 2 of the EU Treaty, the Union is established on the basis of fundamental values of respect for democracy, the rule of law and human rights.<sup>28</sup> Through its Development Cooperation Instrument, the EU aims to eliminate poverty in developing countries, and to ensure democracy, the rule of law, human rights and good governance.<sup>29</sup> In addition to the reduction of poverty, the EU's official development assistance (ODA) policies prioritize consolidating democracy and reinforcing the rule of law in developing countries under the "European Consensus on Development."<sup>30</sup>

The UK has been the main provider of funds to the ODA; as a result of the UK's departure from the Union, the EU's ODA budget lost 13%, or €1 billion.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, it is the largest country complying with 0.7% of its commitment to the ODA.<sup>32</sup> Brexit will thus imply a significant backward step in terms of reaching an international aim including the promotion of human rights, trade, development and humanitarian aid established 50 years ago and regularly renewed by the UN. Since the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) plays a very significant role in the development sector at a global level, Brexit will also lead to a loss of expertise within the Union that had been provided by the DFID.<sup>33</sup> In this regard, the UK's departure might decrease the EU's soft power and the importance

25 "For the EU's economy, Brexit is like the EU28 becoming the EU10", *Facts4EU*, [https://facts4eu.org/news/2019\\_apr\\_eu28\\_to\\_eu10](https://facts4eu.org/news/2019_apr_eu28_to_eu10) (Accessed 02 October 2020).

26 Daniel Boffey, "EU summit collapses as leaders struggle to fill € 75 bn Brexit hole", *The Guardian*, 21 February 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/21/eu-leaders-at-odds-over-filling-brexit-shortfall> (Accessed 18 May 2020).

27 Ulrich Krotz and Joachim Schild, "Back to the future? Franco-German bilateralism in Europe's post-Brexit union", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol 25, No 8, 2018, p. 1174-1193.

28 "Treaty on European Union", *EUR-Lex*, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex%3A12016M002> (Accessed 02 October 2020).

29 "DCI-the EU's financing instrument for development cooperation (2014-20)", *EUR-Lex*, [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISUM:110102\\_1](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISUM:110102_1) (Accessed 03 October 2020).

30 European Commission, "The New European Consensus on Development: Our World, Our Dignity, Our Future", [https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/international-partnerships/system/files/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf) (Accessed 4 October 2020).

31 Ian Mitchell and Michael Anderson, "Beyond Brexit: How will EU Overseas Development Assistance Be Affected?", *Center for Global Development*, 28 October 2016, <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/beyond-brexit-how-will-eu-overseas-development-assistance-be-affected> (Accessed 14 April 2020).

32 European Parliament, "Possible impacts of Brexit on EU development and humanitarian policies", April 2017, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578042/EXPO\\_STU\(2017\)578042\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/578042/EXPO_STU(2017)578042_EN.pdf) (Accessed 04 October 2020).

33 Juliana Suess, "Policy Brief: The UK's Policy Towards Africa post-Brexit", *Policy Center for the New South*, May 2019, <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/PCNS-PB1719.pdf> (Accessed 11 May 2020).

of the EU in international aid programs. Brexit will have an important effect on the EU's global presence and its nature.<sup>34</sup> Brexit could accelerate the decrease of European power at the UN, while Russia and China are challenging the EU's liberal norms and values. The UK had a significant role in EU policy at the UN in terms of providing diplomatic leadership and expertise. As a result of its departure, France carries the burdens of becoming the only EU member with a permanent seat on the Security Council. The UK has also held a pivotal role at the Human Rights Council and established far deeper relations with non-European states compared to the other EU members, and has promoted a strong emphasis on individual and political rights at the UN.<sup>35</sup> Hence, London is not only one of the top donors to UN agencies but also plays a leading role in generating ideas.<sup>36</sup> In this regard, the EU's influence in the UN system and other multilateral organizations will decrease after Brexit.

Brexit will also result in collateral damage to the enlargement process, which is considered an important source of EU soft power.<sup>37</sup> Since migration from Eastern countries to the UK played a significant role in the Brexit referendum, according to some analysts it may make Eurosceptic member states more reluctant to accept new countries to the EU.<sup>38</sup> Hence, Brexit will likely result in a slowdown for the Union's Eastern enlargement.

In addition to these challenges, there is a risk that Brexit could trigger a domino effect. The politicization of European integration, together with the refugee problem, has perpetuated Euroscepticism across the board of member states especially after Brexit. Euroscepticism is rising within the EU by strengthening populist parties within member states. Eurosceptic parties are gaining popularity in France, the Netherlands, and increasingly in Germany.

Besides affecting the EU in terms of its economic, foreign and security policy, soft power, and enlargement, Brexit will reshape the delicate balance of power in the EU. Brexit is likely to put France and Germany at the EU's center stage. Both powers will play a pivotal role after the departure of the UK from the Union. In this respect, it is significant to analyze the scenarios of French and German leadership in post-Brexit Europe together with their political positions.

## **French Leadership of the EU**

The first scenario of post-Brexit Europe discussed in this article is based on French leadership in Europe. This scenario portrays the implications for France's role in filling the leadership vacuum in the EU after Brexit. Although Paris has the willingness to lead the EU, whether or not other member states are eager to follow its leadership is in question. According to Charles Grant, director of the Center for European Reform, "the French think that they can act unilaterally without talking to everyone and get

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34 European Parliament, "Possible impacts of Brexit on EU development and humanitarian policies."

35 "UK Mission to the United Nations (New York)", GOV.UK, <https://www.gov.uk/world/uk-mission-to-the-united-nations-new-york> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

36 Richard Gowan, "Separation anxiety: European influence at the UN after Brexit", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 8 May 2018, [https://ecfr.eu/publication/separation\\_anxiety\\_european\\_influence\\_at\\_the\\_un\\_after\\_brexit/](https://ecfr.eu/publication/separation_anxiety_european_influence_at_the_un_after_brexit/) (Accessed 22 December 2020).

37 Patryk Kugiel, "End of European Soft Power? Implications for EU Foreign Policy", *The Polish Quarterly of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, 2017, p. 68.

38 Jon Henley, "Would Brexit trigger a domino effect in Europe?", *The Guardian*, 10 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/10/brexit-domino-effect-europe-eu-referendum-uk> (Accessed 14 April 2020).

away with it, because they have a dynamic young leader with power and no one else does.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Robin Niblett, director of Chatham House states that “France has seen itself as the policy leader of the EU” and adds that “the problem is that since everyone else is weaker, people worry about being bulldozed, since Germany is not acting as a counterweight and Britain is out... Mr. Macron is acting with too heavy a hand.”<sup>40</sup> In this regard, although France has had a significant role from the beginning of Europe’s integration, it would presumably not be easy for France to lead the Union and get full support from other member states in the absence of the UK.

With the election of Francois Mitterrand in 1981, a Euro-enthusiastic approach developed in France. Hence, the socialist government under Mitterrand’s leadership had the goal of increasing France’s role within the EU by steering the Union towards policies compatible with French domestic interests and by working on the requirements for a social Europe.<sup>41</sup> Hence, Mitterrand both pursued the Gaullist view that Europe should be based on France’s image and aimed to implement the myth of the French *mission civilisatrice* towards Europe.<sup>42</sup> During the Presidency of the European Commission under Jacques Delors between 1985 and 1995, Mitterrand played a significant role in the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty.<sup>43</sup> France focused on setting up the required structural change in the European integration project. Jacques Chirac succeeded Mitterrand in 1995 and promoted the Union with various levels of integration at different levels, including defence, monetary and fiscal policies.<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Sarkozy came to power in 2007. During Sarkozy’s Presidency, immigration, defence, climate change and energy were considered significant in terms of both European agenda and national interests.

France continues to advocate a stronger European defence for a common European strategic culture. Paris wants the EU to strengthen its military capabilities and be ready for the use of force when needed.<sup>45</sup> The Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) was launched in 2017 by 25 EU member states for cooperation in defence investment, the interoperability of European armies, and the development of a European industrial base.<sup>46</sup> Compared to Germany, however, France has a different vision for PESCO. France concentrates on its potential for ambition and efficiency by pushing for high-entry criteria and intense operational commitments, whereas Germany opts for inclusiveness.<sup>47</sup> Different from Germany, today French President Emmanuel Macron’s military aim in the EU is to

39 Steven Erlanger, “Macron Steps Into a Leadership Vacuum in Europe, and on Some Toes”, *The New York Times*, 1 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/01/world/europe/macron-france-eu.html>, (Accessed 20 February 2021).

40 Ibid.

41 Robert Ladrech, “Europeanization and French social democracy”, *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, Vol 3, No 1, 2001, p. 37-47.

42 Martin Marcussen and Klaus Rocher, “The social construction of ‘Europe’: lifecycles of nation-state identities in France, Germany and Great Britain”, Bo Stråth (ed.), *Europe and the other and Europe as the other*, Brussels: Peter Lang, 2000, p. 325-359.

43 Alistair Cole and Helen Drake, “The Europeanization of the French polity: continuity, change and adaptation”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol 7, No 1, 2000, p. 26- 43.

44 Beyza C. Tekin, “France and European Integration: An Uneasy Relationship”, *Istanbul Ticaret Universitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Vol 7, No 13, 2008, p.131-146.

45 Tardy, Thierry. “Does European Defence Really Matter? Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Common Security and Defence Policy”, *European Security*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 3 April 2018, p. 119–137.

46 Ministère De L’Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, “European Defence”, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/europe/european-defence/> (Accessed 5 October 2020)

47 Alice Billon-Galland and Martin Quencez, “Can France and Germany Make PESCO Work as a Process Toward EU Defence?”, *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, 2017, p. 2.

act autonomously when necessary, complementing NATO's position with a European capacity to intervene abroad. Hence, he wants to create a common intervention force, a common defence budget, and a common doctrine for action.<sup>48</sup>

Since he came to power in 2017, Macron has aimed to play a leading role in affecting EU foreign policy agendas. Macron stated: "In the area of defence, our aim needs to be ensuring Europe's autonomous operating capabilities, in complement to NATO."<sup>49</sup> He seeks to find ways for the EU to be sovereign from the United States, underlining in his interview in November 2020 that it is not tenable that our international policy should be dependent on the United States or be trailing behind it."<sup>50</sup>

Macron supports a strategic purpose for Europe by arguing that "Europe is Utopia... [but that] utopists are pragmatists, and realists."<sup>51</sup> He considers Brexit as an opportunity for a 'European Renaissance' and frankly announced a set of EU reform ideas in his September 2017 Sorbonne speech.<sup>52</sup> After Brexit, Macron aims to reform the EU and perpetuate its integration.<sup>53</sup> He underlined the necessity of the EU reform and stated at the 56th Munich Security Conference in February 2020 that "we need to create a new dynamic for the European adventure."<sup>54</sup> Macron regards the NATO alliance as brain dead, whereas the eastern members advocate NATO as a shield against Russia. In an interview with *The Economist* magazine, Macron stated that "what we are currently experiencing is the brain death of NATO" and warned that "we should reassess the reality of what NATO is in light of the commitment of the US."<sup>55</sup> He added that, "in my opinion, Europe has the capacity to defend itself" and emphasized that "the question about the present purpose of NATO is a real question that needs to be asked."<sup>56</sup>

Accordingly, in the scenario of French leadership of the EU, France has the potential to lead the bloc within the framework of an EU-wide military union. In addition, it is argued that France benefits from Brexit in terms of implementing protectionist policies and harmonizing social and economic policies. However, according to some commentators, Paris could forfeit a counterbalance to Germany as a result of the UK's departure from the Union.<sup>57</sup>

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48 Daniel Keohane, "Macron's European Defence Doctrine", *Carnegie Europe*, 28 September 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/73246> (Accessed 6 October 2020).

49 Ibid.

50 "President Macron interviewed by Le Grand Continent", Ministère De L'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères, 12 November 2020, <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/news/article/president-macron-interviewed-by-le-grand-continent-12-nov-2020> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

51 "Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, on receiving the Charlemagne Prize", Présidence De La République, 10 May 2018, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2018/05/10/speech-by-m-emmanuel-macron-president-of-the-republic-on-receiving-the-charlemagne-prize-1.en> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

52 Erik Brattberg, Kinga Brudzińska, and Bernardo Pires De Lima, "Contending European Views on a New Post-Brexit Balance", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 25 March 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/03/25/contending-european-views-on-new-post-brexit-balance-pub-81354> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

53 Gabriela Baczyńska, "Missing you already - how Brexit tilts EU political alliances", *Reuters*, 20 January 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-britain-eu-dynamics/missing-you-already-how-brexit-tilts-eu-political-alliances-idUSKBN1ZR1BM> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

54 Alexandra Brozowski, "In Munich, Macron presents EU reform as answer to 'weakening West'", *EURACTIV*, 15 February 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/future-eu/news/in-munich-macron-presents-eu-reform-as-answer-to-weakening-west/> (Accessed 15 December 2020).

55 "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead", *The Economist*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead> (Accessed 11 December 2020).

56 Ibid.

57 Krotz and Schild, "Back to the Future."

In this regard, it can be evaluated that in the post-Brexit Europe, the leading role of France in the EU will not be accepted by other member states. Hence, France presumably would have difficulties steering the EU successfully while implementing security and defence policy in the absence of the UK.

## German Leadership of the EU

The second scenario involves Germany as the dominant power after Brexit, filling the leadership void in the EU. As underlined by *The Economist* magazine, “Brexit would upset(s) the balance of power, leaving more naked both German hegemony and French weakness.”<sup>58</sup> Hence, Brexit is considered to imply that the change in geostrategic and political outlook in the EU puts Germany as the significant potential leader. Although Germany emerges as the potential leader in the post-Brexit EU on the surface, it is significant to analyze the implications of this scenario.

Historically, Germany has been a powerful player in European politics. One of the main goals of European integration dating back to the 1950 Schuman Plan was to limit German power. Supranational politics based on the Lisbon Treaty’s Ordinary Legislative Procedure remain a decision-making method that confines the effect of German power and that of any other member state.<sup>59</sup> Germany’s structural power within the EU is fundamentally related to its domestic politics and economics. Germany holds a sui generis economic model that harmonizes with the EU’s policy profile. With a population of nearly 83 million, Germany is the largest EU member state;<sup>60</sup> its current account surplus accounted for 7.4% of the country’s nominal GDP in March 2020.<sup>61</sup>

Germany’s economic development, enriched by the addition of cheap labor from the former East Germany, instantly surpassed that of France after the end of the Cold War. Berlin increased its exports and, with the adoption of the euro, successfully amassed trade surpluses both within and outside of the EU. The euro became Germany’s ‘magic mallet’ when it quadrupled its trade surplus compared to other European countries.<sup>62</sup> Although Germany’s power increased geopolitically after the end of the Cold War, it avoided becoming a warrior state and chose to base its power on its civilian capacity in terms of its economic advantage over other European states.

In the post-Cold War era, the reformation of national security and unity made Germany pursue “a stable, self-satisfied polity: a polity where public opinion insists on the privileging of German economic interests.”<sup>63</sup> The Eurozone crisis uncovered Germany’s reluctance when Germany’s ever-strengthening economy and principal creditor status put it in the driver’s seat in terms of crisis

58 “Brexit brief: How others see it”, *Economist*, 30 April 2016, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2016/04/30/how-others-see-it> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

59 Bulmer, “Germany and the European Union: Post-Brexit Hegemon?”, p. 16.

60 “Germany Population”, *Worldometer*, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/germany-population/> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

61 “Germany Current Account Balance”, *CEIC*, <https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/germany/current-account-balance--of-nominal-gdp#:~:text=Germany's%20Current%20Account%20surplus%20accounted,surplus%20in%20the%20previous%20quarter> (Accessed 11 May 2020).

62 Yoichi Funabashi, “The post-Brexit ‘German Question’”, *The Japan Times*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2020/02/10/commentary/world-commentary/post-brexit-german-question/#.Xu-vdy2xvBJ> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

63 Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, *German Power and the European Union: Europe’s reluctant hegemon?*, London: Red Globe Press, 2019, p.118.

management.<sup>64</sup> In an interview with *The Economist* magazine, Macron implied that Germany's lack of eagerness for the fiscal and economic integration of the EU, its indifference to assuming European leadership, and its military inadequacy decrease the geopolitical significance of Europe.<sup>65</sup>

The UK has been Germany's ally in single market issues against the other group of member states which are supporting economic interventionism, active industrial policy and hesitant to implement a liberalization agenda.<sup>66</sup> As a result of Brexit, Germany has lost its liberal partner in the face of France's protectionist policies. Brexit will strengthen Germany's role in the EU, an outcome Germany does not welcome. Indeed, the then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier rejected any German interest in European leadership and argued that "circumstances have forced it into a central role... preserving that union and sharing the burden of leadership are Germany's top priorities."<sup>67</sup> Similarly, Julian Rappold of the German Council on Foreign Relations argued that Germany would be compelled to take on a leading role that would result in unease among German politicians and their partners and added that in the long-run, German leadership, should it materialize, could be harmful for the political atmosphere and create negative consequences for European cooperation.<sup>68</sup>

On the surface, Brexit implies that there is a possibility for German leadership in the EU. The power of Germany in the EU is closely connected to domestic and economic politics. Both Germany's sui generis economic model and domestic consensus of support contributes to its powerful role within the EU. However, in analyzing Germany's potential to play the leadership role in the EU, it is also important to take into account the constraints that exist.

In the scenario of German leadership of the EU, although Germany possesses the structural power to exerting leadership within the Union, as it is underlined by some scholars, domestic politics is considered as an impediment for Berlin to achieve it.<sup>69</sup> There has been a change in the domestic consensus regarding the support for the EU, especially when the right-wing populist AfD entered the Bundestag.<sup>70</sup> Whereas Merkel secured a fourth term as German chancellor by taking 33% of the vote, the 2017 federal election was a disappointing victory for her.<sup>71</sup> In addition, the success of the AfD with 12.6% of the vote was unprecedented.<sup>72</sup> The rise of populism has changed the basis of Germany's European policy. Hence, it would presumably be difficult for the German government to prevent the populist challenge to the EU. In this regard, as it is also stated by Simon Bulmer, Germany's leadership

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64 Simon Bulmer and William E. Paterson, "Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon? Of economic strength and political constraints", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol 20, No 10, 2013, p. 1387-1405.

65 "Emmanuel Macron warns Europe: NATO is becoming brain-dead", *The Economist*, 7 November 2019 <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/11/07/emmanuel-macron-warns-europe-nato-is-becoming-brain-dead> (Accessed 23 December 2020).

66 Daniela Annette Kroll and Dirk Leuffen, "Ties that bind, can also strangle: the Brexit threat and the hardships of reforming the EU", *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol 23, No 9, 2016, p.1311-1320.

67 Anna Sauerbrey, "After Brexit Can Germany Lead Europe Alone?", *The New York Times*, 4 July 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/05/opinion/after-brexit-can-germany-lead-europe-alone.html> (Accessed 16 May 2020).

68 Eszter Zalan, "Germany reluctant to lead Europe in case of Brexit", *EUObserver*, 23 June 2016, <https://euobserver.com/political/133946> (Accessed 18 May 2020).

69 Bulmer and Paterson, "Germany as the EU's reluctant hegemon?"

70 Bulmer, "Germany and the European Union: Post-Brexit Hegemon."

71 Kate Connolly, "German election: Merkel wins fourth term but far-right AfD surges to third", *The Guardian*, 24 September 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/24/angela-merkel-fourth-term-far-right-afd-third-german-election> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

72 Charles Lees, "The 'Alternative for Germany': The rise of right-wing populism at the heart of Europe", *Politics*, Vol. 38, No 3, 2018, p. 295-310.

scenario within the post-Brexit EU is presumed to be unsuccessful.<sup>73</sup> According to some scholars, Germany would presumably continue to stay away from undertaking burdens and responsibilities in the EU.<sup>74</sup> Hence, this further scenario considers Germany becoming more reluctant to play a leadership role within the post-Brexit Europe due to the impediments caused by domestic politics, including the rise of populism.

## A Franco-German Partnership?

The third scenario for the post-Brexit EU is the maintenance of the Franco-German partnership. This scenario would signify a ‘back to the future’ trend based on the embedded nature of bilateral relations between Germany and France.<sup>75</sup> The scenario of a Franco-German partnership could imply going back to the conditions before the UK’s membership in the Union. However, with the UK’s departure from the Union, it can be considered that France and Germany would not be able to get into a partnership due to their rivalry.

After World War II, bilateral cooperation between France and Germany was regarded as the ‘engine’ of European integration. Indeed, Franco-German cooperation within the EU has been significant in terms of eliminating deadlocks in negotiations at the EU level and finding solutions to the Union’s problems. The Élysée Treaty of 1963 institutionalized the holding of cooperation and joint cabinet meetings at the highest political level prior to European Council meetings.<sup>76</sup> Some of the bilateral initiatives of the Franco-German partnership constituted the basis for prospective EU projects, especially in the field of a common defence policy. The Franco-German Defence and Security Council in 1989 created the Franco-German Brigade; this initiative became the prototype for the Eurocorps, the European Rapid Reaction Force, and the EU battle groups.<sup>77</sup>

Bilateral cooperation between France and Germany has been the forerunner for negotiations on various EU Treaties. For example, the Mitterrand-Kohl plan in 1991 played a crucial role in the Maastricht Treaty, involving a role for the EU in security policy and advances on the European economic and monetary union.<sup>78</sup> In addition, Franco-German cooperation was very significant in formulating the constitution of the European Monetary System and the introduction of the euro.<sup>79</sup> In this regard, Germany and France pursued the possibility of enhanced collaboration within the Union for other members looking for cooperation in a different policy framework.<sup>80</sup>

However, Franco-German cooperation did not last very long. Germany does not share the same vision with France in terms of economic development. Philippe Martin, an economic adviser to the French government, states: “[Germany and France] do not speak the same economic language,” noting

73 Bulmer, “Germany and the European Union: Post-Brexit Hegemon.”

74 Krotz and Schild, “Back to the Future.”

75 Ibid.

76 “The Franco-German relationship in the European Union”, *European Parliament*, October 2015, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/568359/EPRS\\_BRI\(2015\)568359\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2015/568359/EPRS_BRI(2015)568359_EN.pdf) (Accessed 11 October 2020).

77 Alistair Cole, *Franco-German relations*, New York, Routledge, 2001, pp. 115, 116.

78 European Parliament, “The Franco-German relationship in the European Union.”

79 Ibid.

80 Ibid.

“it is difficult to negotiate when you do not have the same model in mind.”<sup>81</sup> While France believes that the Eurozone is at risk of collapsing if it does not address and resolve its inequalities, Germany finds the status quo sufficient since it has gained so much from it.<sup>82</sup> While Germany continues to increase its seemingly endless trade surpluses, France is racking up multi-billion euro deficits.<sup>83</sup> Not surprisingly, Berlin has been reluctant to support Macron’s proposal of pooling financial resources for the Eurozone since the German parliament believes that would create a “transfer union” and result in Germany providing more financial resources than it would receive from a collective fund.<sup>84</sup> Hence, the opposing opinions of Germany and France on economic policies pose a problem.

In addition, Franco-German relations have prominently become stiff when Macron regarded NATO alliance as “brain dead”; Merkel condemned Macron’s assessment and stated that “he had used drastic words, that [were] not my view of cooperation in NATO.”<sup>85</sup> In addition, at a dinner to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, while conversing with Macron, Merkel reportedly expressed her criticism of him: “I understand your desire for disruptive politics, but I’m tired of picking up the pieces. Over and over, I have to glue together the cups you have broken so that we can then sit down and have a cup of tea together.”<sup>86</sup> If true, this conversation reveals critical strains in the Franco-German relationship.

Mark Leonard, the director of the European Council on Foreign Relations told the Guardian that “the Franco-German relationship is the single most important relationship in the EU and it’s in a totally toxic condition. And it is going to get worse before it gets better.”<sup>87</sup> France and Germany have clashed over other issues as well. For example, Germany condemned Macron’s positions against an EU-US trade agreement and his relations with Russia. Although France is against Germany’s Nord-Stream 2 Project with Russia, it maintains the ambition to strengthen its relations with Russia.<sup>88</sup> France’s decisions in EU politics in 2016 were not compatible with Germany’s position: Macron’s preference for Ursula von der Leyen as new Commission President; his support for Kristalina Georgieva for the IMF presidency; a comparatively short extension of Article 50 in the Brexit talks; and, most importantly, the rejection of the opening of accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania.<sup>89</sup> Bilateral cooperation between France and Germany continued to deteriorate in 2017. While French President Macron

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81 Sylvie Kauffmann, “Macron Puts Germany on Trial”, *The New York Times*, 7 May 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/opinion/macron-puts-germany-on-trial.html> (Accessed 6 October 2020).

82 Ibid.

83 Crispian Balmer, “Economic governance divides France and Germany”, *Reuters*, 19 May 2010, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-france-germany-governance-analysis/economic-governance-divides-france-and-germany-idUKTRE64I5X620100519> (Accessed 8 October 2020).

84 Lewis Sanders, “How France’s Emmanuel Macron wants to reform the EU”, *Deutsche Welle*, 16 March 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/how-frances-emmanuel-macron-wants-to-reform-the-eu/a-43002078> (Accessed 9 October 2020).

85 Angelique Chrisafis, “Macron criticized by US and Germany over NATO ‘brain death’ claims”, *The Guardian*, 7 November 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/07/macron-warns-of-nato-brain-death-as-us-turns-its-back-on-allies> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

86 Steven Erlanger, “Merkel and Macron Publicly Clash Over NATO”, *The New York Times*, 23 November 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/23/world/europe/nato-france-germany.html> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

87 Jon Henley, “Can Merkel and Macron get Franco-German relations back on track?”, *The Guardian*, 2 January 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/02/can-merkel-and-macron-get-franco-german-relations-back-on-track> (Accessed 18 December 2020).

88 Anca Gurzu, “France and Germany split over Nord Stream 2 pipeline”, *Politico*, 7 February 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/france-and-germany-split-over-nord-stream-2-pipeline-russian-gas-regulation/>.

89 Ibid.

aimed at comprehensively reforming the French economy, he looked for Germany's cooperation on Eurozone reforms.<sup>90</sup> However, Germany did not reply positively to Macron's suggestions in his 2017 Sorbonne speech, and the countries could not reach a comprehensive agreement.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the French President changed his strategy and decided to act alone in European affairs. EU officials considered his decision as "damaging the bloc's credibility not only in Western Balkans but beyond."<sup>92</sup>

France's new attitude weakened the relationship between the two countries since Germany, which has often questioned the French vision for Europe, was not happy with Macron's policy style. There has been a quarrel between France and Germany regarding "European autonomy" in defence capabilities. German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer gave a keynote speech regarding European defence. She criticized Macron's views on European defence and argued that "the idea of strategic autonomy for Europe goes too far if it is taken to mean that we could guarantee security, stability and prosperity in Europe without NATO and without the US. That is an illusion."<sup>93</sup>

In addition, Germany and France promote diverging policies in terms of relations with great powers. Germany holds on to its ties with the US more strongly than France, and it underlines the unchanged relevance of NATO.<sup>94</sup> Germany is prone to proceed with an EU-US trade agreement by involving agriculture, while that would be detrimental for France and its farmers. On the other hand, France has supported reconciliation with Russia and opposed trade talks with the US. France's attitude towards Russia frustrates Germany. In his speech in August 2019, Macron argued that he wanted to bring Russia in from the cold to deal with international problems such as Syria and that it was necessary to clarify relations with Russia for the maintenance of European stability and security.<sup>95</sup> However, as argued by some commenters, Germany feels very uncomfortable with Macron's unilateral attitude towards Russia.<sup>96</sup>

During the Brexit process, Germany and France revealed the first symptoms of cracking ahead of the EU Summit in April 2019, when the EU agreed to give Theresa May an extension of the Brexit deadline until October 31, 2019.<sup>97</sup> After the summit, EU law professor Galvin Barrett stated that Germany and France had revealed the signs of division over their priorities.<sup>98</sup> While France was very

90 Sophie Porschlegel, "Rebooting Franco-German cooperation", *European Policy Centre*, 13 January 2020, <https://www.epc.eu/en/Publications/Rebooting-Franco-German-cooperation-2e0540> (Accessed 11 October 2020).

91 Ibid.

92 Dimitar Bechev, "Did Macron kill the EU enlargement dream?", *Al Jazeera*, 23 October 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/10/23/did-macron-kill-the-eu-enlargement-dream> (Accessed 14 December 2020).

93 "Second Keynote Speech by German Federal Minister of Defence", *Federal Ministry of Defence*, 19 November 2020, <https://www.bmvg.de/en/news/second-keynote-speech-german-minister-of-defence-akk-4503976> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

94 Jana Puglierin and Ulrike Esther Franke, "The big engine that might: How France and Germany can build a geopolitical Europe", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 14 July 2020, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the\\_big\\_engine\\_that\\_might\\_how\\_france\\_and\\_germany\\_can\\_build\\_a\\_geopolitical\\_e](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_big_engine_that_might_how_france_and_germany_can_build_a_geopolitical_e) (Accessed 23 October 2020).

95 "Discours Du Président De La République Emmanuel Macron À La Conférence Des Ambassadeurs Et Des Ambassadrices De 2019", *Présidence de la République*, 27 August 2019, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/08/27/discours-du-president-de-la-republique-a-la-conference-des-ambassadeurs-1> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

96 Grant, "How the EU can survive Brexit."

97 "Special European Council (Art. 50)", *Council of the European Union*, (10 April 2019), <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/european-council/2019/04/10/> (Accessed 21 February 2021).

98 Aurora Bosotti, "EU on the Brink? Brexit to worsen 'Critical Tension' between France and Germany", *Express*, 10 May 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1124897/Brexit-news-France-Germany-eurozone-UK-EU-withdrawal-Theresa-May-deal-latest> (Accessed 23 May 2020).

concerned with the damage that keeping Britain within the EU would do, Germany considered the harm that a hard exit would do to them and wanted a long period for the UK's departure.<sup>99</sup> In early May 2019, French President Emmanuel Macron argued that Brexit was monopolizing the European agenda to the detriment of other significant issues and admitted that he and Chancellor Angela Merkel were "not completely on the same page" about Brexit.<sup>100</sup> Merkel maintained that the EU should abstain from "putting pressure" on the UK and instead provide some space for the British to "make their own choices."<sup>101</sup> The division between the two countries on such a critical issue was significant and had repercussions; although the divergence involved Brexit, it represented a much more significant split over reform of the EU.

In this regard, the political turmoil in the Union after Brexit exacerbated the power struggle at the heart of the EU. Both powers have disagreed on fundamental issues. Hence, there are many reasons to question the prospects of a Franco-German partnership scenario. Britain's presence in the EU provided a mechanism of balance between Berlin and Paris. As a result of Brexit, France has lost an ally to curb German influence, while Germany has lost a market-oriented partner to serve as a counterweight against member states more inclined towards economic protectionism.<sup>102</sup> With the UK's departure from the Union, the balance in the European Council regarding economic policy debates will change. In the absence of the UK, the combined votes of Germany and other liberal states would be insufficient to reach 35% to block illiberal measures.<sup>103</sup> Hence, it is considered that Germany would have difficulties to counter protectionist economic policies led by France. On the other hand, France has considered Britain a partner in defence policies and a counterbalance to German influence. Similar to Saint Malo Declaration, with Lancaster House Treaties in 2010, the UK and France reaffirmed close operational and industrial defence cooperation as well as ultimately improving the collective capability of NATO and European Defence.<sup>104</sup> Thus for France, the UK was a significant counterweight to Germany in terms of managing to shape compromises on defense. This will be shattered with Brexit.

Accordingly, it can be considered that the UK's departure would signify a shift in the balance of power in the EU. Brexit Party MEP Robert Howland states that "Brexit will cause a break in relations between France and Germany due to the buffer role the UK played between the two 'remaining heavyweights' of the European Union."<sup>105</sup> In this regard, Howland also claimed that "ironically, the Germans are really going to miss us—Great Britain has historically acted as a buffer between those two old adversaries and a deterrent to France's imperial tendencies."<sup>106</sup> In addition, EU Competition

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99 Ibid.

100 "Macron admits to Franco-German splits on key issues", *Euractiv*, 26 April 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/macron-admits-to-franco-german-splits-on-key-issues/> (Accessed 12 May 2020).

101 Guy Chazan, Alex Barker and Victor Mallet, "Brexit pressures expose cracks in Franco-German relationship", *Financial Times*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/78f8f660-5c45-11e9-9dde-7aedca0a081a> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

102 Krotz and Schild, "Back to the Future."

103 "Brexit: the impact on the UK and the EU", *Global Counsel*, June 2015, [https://brexit.hypotheses.org/files/2017/01/Global-Counsel\\_Impact\\_of\\_Brexit.pdf](https://brexit.hypotheses.org/files/2017/01/Global-Counsel_Impact_of_Brexit.pdf) (Accessed 08 December 2020).

104 "UK-France Defence Cooperation Treaty Announced", *GOV.UK*, 2 November 2010, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-france-defence-co-operation-treaty-announced--2> (Accessed 12 December 2020).

105 Aurora Bosotti, "Brexit to Shatter Franco-German alliance as sparks fly between Merkel and Macron", *Express*, 27 November 2019, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1209811/Brexit-news-UK-common-EU-budget-Germany-France-Angela-Merkel-Emmanuel-Macron-latest> (Accessed 14 May 2020).

106 Bosotti, "Brexit to Shatter Franco-German alliance as sparks fly between Merkel and Macron".

and Digital Chief Margrethe Vestager argued that “France and Germany will struggle to drive the EU without the British energy that helped Paris and Berlin work together.”<sup>107</sup>

In this regard, it can be presumed that Brexit would gradually alter the political balance within the EU by making the divisions between Germany and France more apparent. The balance of power among the UK, Germany, and France was very significant in terms of soft power, the economy, high politics, and historical tradition. Hence, the UK’s departure signals a paradigm shift. As Ian Lesser, a former American diplomat and the director of the German Marshall Fund’s Brussels office points out, Brexit will make some of the divisions in the EU more visible and difficult to deal with.<sup>108</sup> According to some commenters, it could create a power vacuum in the EU by making the relationship between France and Germany more difficult.<sup>109</sup> As a result, the absence of a good working relationship between France and Germany can be considered to have a particularly negative effect on the EU’s ability to move forward.

## Conclusion

None of the three scenarios analyzed in the article raise optimistic expectations for the future of the EU. Brexit not only poses a challenge for the UK but also for the EU at large, as the shift in power dynamics could lead to problems in the European project. It can be considered that France and Germany would vie for the position left vacant by the UK’s exit, further shifting the balances of the organization by pulling allied nations to their sides. The EU conjecturally would have difficulties to survive such a power struggle as its main purpose since conception has been to prevent further conflict between regional actors. Due to Brexit, the potential asymmetric relations of Germany and France presumably would cause the EU’s image to be negatively affected.

The future of the EU is a multiple-layered issue that seems unlikely to be resolved in the near future, as the UK appears to be the defence mechanism that has held off rivalries for decades. Hence, Britain’s exit can be considered to generate a power vacuum in the EU by making the relationship between France and Germany even more difficult.

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