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What does Macron need the  
Weimar Triangle for?

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*Poland's passiveness in the EU, attachment to the złoty and entanglement in the dispute over the rule of law are making it much more difficult for it take part in far-reaching joint initiatives with Berlin and Paris. Nevertheless, in France, interest in Poland and the rest of this part of the EU is growing.*

The “old” EU, from before enlargement to Central and Eastern Europe, was often divided into the part closer to Paris (to simplify: the EU’s South) and another part economically connected to Berlin, along with London, which was considered the main defender of the free market against French state interventionism. For many French observers, the enlargement of 2004-2007 made the part of the EU closer to Berlin bigger. Meanwhile, the Weimar Triangle created in the 1990s never established itself fully as a lasting format within the EU, although – long before the Three Seas Initiative was conceptualised – Poland sometimes wanted to represent the younger part of the EU within this triangle.

The last major endeavour that can be ascribed to the Weimar Triangle was the joint mission of foreign ministers to Kyiv in 2014. However, shortly afterwards, the Ukraine talks shifted to the Normandy Format (Ukraine, France, Germany and Russia) and Berlin – not Paris, as was previously the case – independently committed to inform and consult the Poles on Ukrainian matters. Admittedly, at one point, François Hollande had tried to build

closer ties with the “younger” part of the EU, which had been neglected by the French. However, Emmanuel Macron became the first president to start penetrating Central and Eastern Europe quite consistently, also as part of the shifts within the EU after Brexit. These efforts include Poland, the largest country in the region, despite the friction caused by Macron’s criticism of the violation of the rule of law (“Europe is not a supermarket” in 2017) and support for linking payments from the EU budget to it.

Following in Germany’s footsteps, France is banking on a “compartmentalised” approach to Poland, in which disputes over the rule of law (readily delegated to the EU institutions in Brussels) need not contaminate cooperation on other EU matters completely. Hence the cautious attempts to reactivate the Weimar Triangle: the meeting of the French, German and Polish Europe ministers in January, Macron’s visit to Warsaw in February and preliminary plans for a Weimar summit that were thwarted by the pandemic. Poland’s decision to remain outside the eurozone and Warsaw’s reluctance to support closer EU integration (or coordination), compounded by its disputes with Brussels over the judiciary, mean that strategic initiatives concerning the EU’s future cannot really emerge in the France-Germany-Poland triangle now. Nevertheless, in the past year or so, Berlin and Paris have sought Poland’s support when promoting corrections to EU competition policy (a new development during Macron’s presidency). The three countries’ ministers even sent EU Commissioner Margrethe Vestager joint letters on the matter. The aim of these efforts is to support the EU’s renewed industrial policy. Yet, for now, these joint efforts by the three countries have been very general. Moreover, Warsaw is extremely reluctant to embrace the concept of “European strategic autonomy” advocated by France, which is often interpreted as anti-American.

### **Between Brussels and the US**

Poland’s very strong reliance on its alliance with America (including during the Trump presidency), a certain strategic suspension in Berlin,

which is reluctant to face the US's weakening engagement in European affairs, and France's overly eager (according to Polish critics) plans for a "post-American" Europe are one of the main inconsistencies between the three countries in the Weimar Triangle. Poland's dramatic termination of the contract for the French Caracal helicopters in 2016 was not just a blow to proper relations with Paris; it was also a decision (it is unclear how well thought out at the time) to withdraw from strong involvement in the consolidation of the European defence industry, which, for Paris and Berlin, is supposed to be part of the new "defence union" within the EU framework. The idea has been criticised, and sometimes directly opposed, by Washington due to concerns about the interests of the American industry, which, when it comes to armaments, is always connected to defence or even foreign policy. For this reason, Poland is very much balancing regarding the "defence union". It is much closer to Germany, which is most interested in the project's purely industrial dimension, than to France, with its ideas of European strategic autonomy or sovereignty. Warsaw and Berlin emphasise the need to strengthen European defence or simply how it is complementary to NATO.

Despite fairly firm declarations by Paris and Berlin after the poisoning of Alexei Navalny and their refusal to recognise Alexander Lukashenko as president of Belarus, their attitude to the post-Soviet space continues to differ from Poland's – and this is nothing new. Reluctant to admit his defeat, or loyal to his very far-reaching visions, Macron continues to defend his attempts to engage in a new strategic dialog with Moscow. Amid all its now-undisguised disappointment with Russia, Berlin is sticking (contrary to Poland's interests) to the symbol of its Ostpolitik; that is, the construction of Nord Stream 2. The project was once defended in the name of the "Russia's modernisation through economic rapprochement". These days, one still hears: "even during the Cold War, energy cooperation with the USSR continued". Although a French company is involved in the pipeline, Paris unblocked work on a correction to the EU directive in 2019 to make

Nord Stream 2 subject to new EU regulations making life harder for Gazprom (a decision not fully appreciated in Poland). The move came as a surprise to Berlin and went against efforts by German diplomats at the time. However, France did not halt construction, which would have been ideal for Poland and the Baltic States.

### **Climate: Poland puts on the brakes?**

The EU's climate policy is the latest example of the distribution of tension within the Weimar Triangle. Paris is advocating the most ambitious actions and Poland is the most resistant. Germany, which put off agreeing to climate neutrality in 2050 until late spring 2019, is presenting a "more moderate" stance (from Warsaw's perspective). However, this is a subject area in which not just the Triangle, but also the informal "format" of the EU's largest countries plays a considerable role. The EU Recovery Fund, strongly tailored to green and digital investments, was created last spring in Brussels following fairly close consultations between the European Commission and Germany and France (its initiators), as well as Italy, Spain and Poland. This was in line with the negotiating principle that when the biggest countries agree, it will be easier to convince the rest of the EU. Although it is irritated by how Poland is putting on the brakes, Paris understands that, if only because of its size, the EU cannot achieve climate neutrality without Poland's loyal cooperation.

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