



Why the Franco-German couple fails to inspire

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I distinctly remember when I first heard the word Merkozy. It was by the end of the Polish presidency of the EU, late 2011; the Council had been blocking my attempts at finalising the legislation on resettlement of refugees and I needed to know why. Before they wrapped up their work, two staffers of the Polish presidency agreed to tell me why over a pint of beer. They put the blame on the then upcoming French presidential elections, where Nicolas Sarkozy would have to beat Marine Le Pen in the first round (before facing François Hollande); if Le Pen discovered that the EU was trying to increase the funding for the resettlement of refugees in EU Member States, she would use that in the campaign, hurting Sarkozy. When I pointed to the ability of the presidency to set the Council's agenda, they said: "oh, forget it; things don't move whenever they are blocked by the Merkozy". They laughed. "That's how you call Merkel and Sarkozy". A few weeks later I saw the term printed for the first time in a newspaper article. Then it somehow caught on, and suddenly it was everywhere. In a way people still miss the term and try to recapture it by speaking of 'Merkollande' or similar her new coinages.

On the 25th anniversary of Helmut Kohl and François's joint address to the European Parliament, Merkel and Hollande also spoke to the plenary in Strasbourg. A lot has happened to the Franco-German duo in these 25 years. Back then, they were the motor of the European project, together with then Commission president Jacques Delors. In more recent years, as my Merkozy anecdote illustrates, they are better at blocking things (not only resettlement of refugees, but also Eurobonds, for instance) than at promoting new ideas

The dispassionate reaction to Merkel's and Hollande's speeches this week in Strasbourg is make this blatantly obvious. The two leaders said nothing particularly wrong. Quite on the contrary in Merkel's case, actually, who focused her whole speech on the issue of refugees, said all the right things on the humanitarian question and clearly stated that the EU is (or should be) a 'community of values', meaning that the minimalist project to keep the EU at the level of just a single market should be overcome. Hollande was more eclectic. He spoke on the eurozone, Ukraine and various other things. Hence his speech had more weak points. To me it seemed as if Hollande not quite understands the level of institutional innovation we will need in order to have an effective economic governance of the eurozone — which, in my view, would mean turning the EU into a full-fledged democracy — neither did he produce a vision of how to solve the economic and social crisis in Europe, although he did indeed mention the problem of youth unemployment.

Neither of the two leaders, however, did address the question of the 'rule of law' crisis in the EU and the threat impending on the Union from increasingly authoritarian regimes like Viktor

Orbán's Hungary. And this is the crisis that will make or break the EU (more on that on a new blog post next week).

More than in what Merkel and Hollande say, the problem lies in what they do not say and especially in they do not represent: France and Germany, when speaking together, are no longer representing a vision for Europe.

The Franco-German couple does not inspire anymore. There are many reasons for this, of which I would like to point out three.

First, the EU is now much larger than it was at the times of the German-French motor , and for many new Member States who joined since the 1980s, the overcoming of the rivalry between France and Germany is an interesting historical event, but not much more than that. It as a positive and welcome fact, but not something that will make the heart of people in Portugal or Estonia beat faster. The symbolism of the two leaders from France and Germany speaking in the capital of the once disputed territories of Alsace and Lorraine is lost on the majority of the EU countries. This may be unfortunate, but they have their own historical battles and tragedies to remember.

Secondly, to many EU observers, France and Germany represent the core of the problem which is: intergovernmentalism. The European Council is where European solutions go to die, or are only revived after too many fractious summits, when it may already be too late. To give just one example, Merkozy killed Eurobonds during a walk in Deauville, and the eurozone crisis became intractable until Mario Draghi, president of the European Central Bank (ECB) uttered his famous 'whatever it takes'. In consequence, Europe may be the only region of the world where people pay more attention to a central banker than to the executive leaders, and rightly so.

But, thirdly and most importantly, France and Germany fail to inspire because — well — they do not say inspiring things. They are bound by their own limits. In the beginning of 2013, François Hollande gave a press conference in the Élysée Palace, and he thought he was being visionary by proposing a Franco-German University. Will that inspire the jobless youth of Greece and Spain? He should have made a bold proposal for a real EU University, located in the various crisis countries, which would take the Erasmus programme to another level and ensure that Europe remains an advanced 'knowledge society'. But he did not, because somehow for him (a little bit less so for Merkel) being Franco-German is the only ambition it takes.

Yet Europe needs a lot more ambition. Things like a Marshall plan for the south, which I would call a 'Ulysses Project'; a European unemployment subsidy; a 'social inheritance' scheme that would support the European youth invest in their lives and careers. Even the Energy Union, as put forward by Donald Tusk, is more practical and interesting than anything by Merkollande recently. So was Merkel's bold stance on refugees, which means that Germany and France are worth more when they work independently than when they function as a couple.

And that is how it should be. In Europe now, we need great ideas that are able to mobilise people. And these ideas should come from any political or social leader, not from an outdated couple.

