



European and Economic Social Committee

Franco-German meeting in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty

Symposium organised by the French Economic and Social Council and the EESC

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Welcome address

by

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Mr President,
Ambassador,
Honoured guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Colleagues,

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to welcome you on behalf of the European Economic and Social Committee to this meeting celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Franco-German Treaty, organised jointly by French Economic and Social Council and the European Economic and Social Committee.

The decision to hold this meeting was taken at a symposium held in Brussels last October. The meeting was to take stock of the situation regarding the development and identity of civil society organisations in France and Germany.

One of the aims of the symposium was to find out more about the status of civil society organisations in the two countries and how they see their role and to raise awareness of the perceived need for institutionalised dialogue among the active stakeholders in these countries, including the social partners, employer and employee organisations, and associations, foundations and networks in public life.

The decision to hold this meeting was both propitious and significant. Thanks to it we are gathered here today to discuss the positive consequences of a Treaty and cooperation that have helped to advance the difficult process of European unification.

Franco-German understanding is essential for the achievement of the European venture because German and French attitudes towards European integration and the future of the Community or the Union tend to differ.

As I noted in my introduction to our symposium in Brussels, the political value and historical importance of the Franco-German Treaty lie not least in the fact that it imposes an obligation for ongoing consultation between two neighbouring countries which epitomise particularly clearly and authoritatively very different visions and views.

The Franco-German Treaty is justifiably considered to be of historic importance and a key political factor for the overall development of international relations and for European integration. This is all the more so in view of the fact that it formalised an understanding between leading figures in both countries which was a *sine qua non* for setting up the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952 and thus for creating the momentum that has ultimately united the peoples of Europe in a new, broad-based and transnational community.

But the important thing for now and the future is to reaffirm the value of the Treaty for European unification, not only at the level of governments and parliaments but between the vital

forces in society, which have organised themselves in the two countries in order to be able to exercise their responsibilities in the running of public affairs.

This is the background to the modest tribute we are now paying with this meeting and the projects to which we shall return later.

In view of the level of integration achieved, one could argue today that the future of the Union does not depend exclusively or primarily on Member States' governments, as was the case during the first decades of unification. Now the driving forces of integration are more the Community institutions – within which governments and diplomacy still, of course, retain their influence and play an important role. These institutions, too, no longer act alone but rather through a process of confrontation and agreement with parliamentary forces, political parties, civil society organisations and local and regional authorities.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Colleagues,

The reconciliation between Germany and France and the understanding and cooperation between these two neighbouring countries facing each other across the Rhine were, from the outset, essential conditions for the success of European unification. By coming together forty years ago, to conclude the Treaty the anniversary of which we are now celebrating, the two partners sought to find a way out of an impasse in integration within the European Economic Community, which urgently needed to find a way forward.

It should be recalled that the Franco-German Treaty has always been open to participation by other Community partners. It was, moreover, in this same spirit that **Robert Schuman** set in train the creation of the first European Community in the 1950s: with his historic declaration of 9 May 1950, he proposed an agreement between France and Germany, at the same extending an invitation to neighbouring countries to join in. The fact that, in the 1960s, the other Member States did not follow the Franco-German example was due to a host of factors that emerged during the negotiations on the Fouchet Plan.

Even so, the Franco-German Treaty was a source of support during the sensitive periods of integration and made a positive contribution - from the point of view of the Community - to clearing up many misunderstandings and overcoming numerous difficulties. This is further proof that Franco-German understanding was a prerequisite for European unification. The Treaty has not only helped to overcome existing difficulties, however. It has also become a paradigm: two hostile neighbours have succeeded in burying their enmity once and for all by uniting to tackle the problems of the future together. That is the lesson of the Treaty.

Be that as it may, I would reiterate that Franco-German understanding has been and continues to be central to European integration. France and Germany are still at the heart of the Union, not only in a geopolitical sense. Seen historically, the two countries have demonstrated, through their reconciliation and pragmatic cooperation based on a sustained effort to understand each other, that it is possible to transcend long-standing enmity and overcome considerable differences.

It goes without saying that cooperation of this kind cannot develop without crises and hitches. We have seen examples of this on many occasions. Nevertheless, we must stress that even the crises in Franco-German relations testify to the need for strengthened cooperation between the two countries that can establish practices which ensure that solutions to problems of this kind can be found.

This is one of the reasons for the current importance of institutionalised consultation and cooperation between the two countries. Another, just as valid today as in the past, is that any proposal on the future of Europe must originate from or be supported by France and Germany for it to be implemented. And we can be pleased that our governments have begun to work closely together again on fundamental European and global policy issues and that the French and German foreign ministers, both members of the European Convention, are putting forward joint proposals for the drawing up of the new EU constitution.

Towards the end of his chancellorship, during a farewell visit to **General de Gaulle**, **Konrad Adenauer** stated in a banquet speech at Rambouillet that he considered the Franco-German Treaty to be the outstanding achievement of his fourteen years as chancellor. It was perhaps a highly subjective and sentimental remark, prompted by his impending departure from office, but it is in perfect harmony with the fact that the Franco-German Treaty on friendship and cooperation, concluded on 23 January 1963, is and will continue to be of fundamental importance for Franco-German relations and the development of European policy.

Indeed, the Treaty marked the end of a past characterised by mistrust, hostility and war. It paved the way for a common future built on friendship, trust and cooperation. The real success of this political endeavour, crafted by German and French leaders who were pioneers in the field of reconciliation, was that it managed, in an exemplary fashion, to cast off a dreadful past by creating the prospect of a better future. That is the basic driving force at the heart of efforts to further European unification.

Mr President,

I would like to conclude by saying that we hope that this meeting will provide impetus towards increased international cooperation between civil society organisations, the development of which is vital for the European Union.

Thank you for your attention.
