



By Melchior Szczepanik,

Head of Brussels Office, Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM)

FOR THE WEIMAR TRIANGLE IT IS TIME TO WALK THE WALK

The Weimar Triangle: yet another revival

At first glance the Weimar Triangle is a cooperation formula that seems predestined to be a dynamic driver of EU integration. It unites three large EU member states with sensitivity to the needs of important regional coalitions: the frugal North, the South, and the Eastern flank. Yet divergences of views meant that the format never quite achieved its potential.

The creation of a new government in Poland, in December 2023, backed by a broad coalition of parties generally supportive of close EU cooperation, paved the way for a revival of the format. In May 2024 ministers of foreign affairs of the three countries adopted a Weimar Agenda [1]. Their pledges included spending more on defence and maintaining steadfast support for Ukraine. They also called for an EU that speaks with one voice on external policy and claimed the High Representative should be strengthened. In addition, the ministers declared determination to support an ambitious and fair global climate policy. Reactivation the Weimar Triangle was mentioned by the Polish foreign minister Radek Sikorski among the ten most important events in Polish foreign policy during the first year of his tenure [2].

EU transformation requires leadership

Weimar's reactivation could not come at a more opportune moment as the EU is in dire need of audacious leadership. To hold its own in an increasingly disrupted world, the EU and its member states need to adapt. Key objectives for the new political cycle could be grouped under three labels: security, economy, and internal reforms.

[1] A Weimar Agenda for a Strong, Geopolitical Union, 22 May 2024, www.gov.pl

[2] R. Sikorski on X on 13 December 2024.

The Union must strengthen its ability to defend itself, support Ukraine, and contain Russia's assault on the rules-based order. In addition, the bloc will attempt to galvanise growth but do so in a way that is in line with its climate ambitions and the protection of biodiversity. Finally, the EU needs a thorough introspection that will produce reforms of the common policies, decision-making procedures, and budget. Those alterations should enable the EU to act swiftly when crises occur, secure financial means that correspond with its ambitions, and use its resources more effectively.

On the issues mentioned above the Weimar Triangle could provide blueprints for reforms and lead them. Given their diplomatic, military and economic potential the three countries are vital for maintaining significant support for Ukraine and for building a strong European pillar within NATO. Reaching the objective of closer cooperation within the defence industry sector will also largely hinge on their determination. On economic issues, though Poland can boast dynamic growth, most of the companies that could become "European champions" come from France and Germany. In addition, it is the latter that has financial firepower to drive an industrial revolution. Hence Weimar could become a laboratory of a balanced industrial policy that does not disrupt competition on the single market and allocates the burden of decarbonisation fairly. Furthermore, a preliminary agreement between the net payers and the major net beneficiary of the EU budget could facilitate a compromise on the Multiannual Financial Framework. Finally, a close coordination within the Weimar Triangle is paramount if the EU is to maintain a united front in talks with the new U.S administration on various aspects of transatlantic cooperation.

In planning reforms the decision-makers face no shortage of ideas and inspiration. The report of a Franco-German expert group of September 2023 urged the Member States to consider bold institutional changes [3]. Recently a large number of recommendations featured in analyses presented by Polish think tanks [4].

A plea for a more ambitious Weimar cooperation does not entail that the three participants should neglect other formats of intra-EU multilateral cooperation. Much the contrary, if Weimar is to become an engine of integration, all three partners must pay a lot of attention to the concerns of their traditional regional alliances.

[3] Sailing on High Seas: Reforming and Enlarging the EU for the 21st Century. Report of the Franco-German working group on the EU institutional reform, 18 September 2023.

[4] See: EU2029: Challenges for the European Commission and Recommendations, Polish Institute of International Affairs, October 2024; What Policies for a secure and competitive Europe? 10 ideas for the European Commission, Polish Economic Institute, December 2024; Re-charging Europe, Green Economy Institute, Cambridge Econometrics, January 2025.

Poland, for instance, will continue to work closely with partners from the Eastern flank – particularly threatened by Russia’s aggressive posture and therefore setting the tone of the debate on improving the Union’s resilience and preparedness for a variety of crises and threats.

More community-oriented thinking needed

The revival of Weimar has not erased divergences between partners. Recent years brought several high-profile clashes between them concerning the best way to support Ukraine, trade, the future of the EU budget and energy policy. Factors related to national politics – slim parliamentary majorities, disagreements within ruling coalitions – could also constitute an obstacle to fruitful cooperation as they sap leaders’ energy and hinder bold moves on the EU level. In all three countries the strong social support for Eurosceptic political forces is a disincentive for the governments to consider making concessions for the sake of long-term common interest.

If the Weimar Triangle is to reach its full potential, it must not limit itself to consultations and lofty declarations. Partners should reach common positions and translate them into practice, for instance by finally making some progress in promoting cooperation in the realm of defence industry. They need to show determination to go beyond short-term perspectives and tackle vested interests in the name of clear benefits for the community. Weimar leaders should not shy away from re-evaluating even those aspects of their EU strategy that have enjoyed the status of dogmas for a long time. Germany needs to deal with its debt aversion and accept that military might can sometimes be necessary to defend EU’s interest. France could show more flexibility to reconcile the drive for Europe’s strategic autonomy and close cooperation with reliable non-EU partners, while Poland could embrace institutional changes, relinquishing unanimity in particular. Both France and Poland would be well advised to engage with the farmers and agricultural lobbies to dispel their apprehensions towards the Mercosur trade agreement and pave the way for the green transition in agriculture. Finally, Weimar leaders will strengthen their calls for reforms at the EU level, if at the same they make efforts to improve national regulations to streamline the green transition, boost innovations and support entrepreneurs.