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226

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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In two separate speeches—one at the Sorbonne University in April and the other during his visit to Germany at the end of May—French President Emmanuel Macron said that Europe is “fighting to the death” (Macron 2024). Indeed, Europeans who are caught between Xi Jinping’s China, Vladimir Putin’s Russia, and the future possibility of Donald Trump’s USA, are the ones who most need unity at this point, but it is precisely because of this sense of insecurity that European unity is eroding.

Macron’s last visit to Germany (Sally 2024) showed that Franco-German relations were only a facade manifestation of friendship and solidarity, and that the French and German governments are no longer able to independently decide on the geopolitical direction of Europe. Moreover, even if they can agree on a specific agenda, it is unlikely that it will be shared by the rest of the European Union.

The solution to this dilemma is to strengthen the Franco-German union and add Poland as a third member. This makes sense, given that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine reduced the differences in the three states’ perceptions of European security, and renewed the Weimar format for collaboration in the interest of peace and security in Europe.

In our article, we will try to briefly answer the following questions: 1. What is the Weimar Triangle? 2. What political factors led to its activation? and 3. What changes might it undergo in the future?

### **What is the Weimar Triangle?**

Along with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, France and Germany achieved great success in stabilizing their relations (Wisniewski 2021). Indeed, Franco-German cooperation became an important factor in accelerating the process of European integration, creating a single market, and developing the competences of the European Union in foreign and domestic affairs. However, Franco-German relations were not enough, and it became necessary to look for new partners to expand ties to the East (Wisniewski 2021).

In parallel, the former socialist Poland, which was the strongest state in Central and Eastern Europe in terms of demographics and politics, needed help in the process of democratization and integration with Western institutions (NATO, the European Union [at that time, the European Community]) (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024).

The interests of the two sides coincided, so in 1991, the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Poland met in the German city of Weimar (the birthplace of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) and established the Weimar Triangle (Allik 2024). The Triangle was first intended to represent the Franco-German experience and serve as a way of bringing Germany and Poland together. Its main task was the reintegration of Poland into European political structures (Dempsey 2024), a goal it achieved successfully when Poland became a member state of NATO in 1999, and of the European Union in 2004.

Politically, the creation of the Weimar Triangle was a strong signal of the formation of a new order, implying that the new Europe had not been created to dominate the poorer post-communist “cousins” of rich countries; the new order was to be inclusive, within the framework of which countries should form a harmonious relationship, regardless of their different views, traditions or experiences (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024). Here, it must be noted that Poland has always held a non-dominant position in this union, and the union was much more vital for Warsaw than it was for Paris and Berlin. On the other hand, Poland was an outstanding power in Central Europe, as evidenced by its influential role in the Visegrád Four (V4), which, together with Poland, unites the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary. The rapid success of the V4 in the region significantly demonstrated the power of Poland and increased its political weight in the Weimar Triangle (Wisniewski 2021).

Although the activities of the Weimar Triangle at the time of its establishment included two main directions: 1. Political dialogue (in international and European affairs) and 2. Cooperation (regional, educational, academic and others) (Wisniewski 2021), the alliance had important consequences for the foreign affairs of Poland, Germany and France. During its 30-year career, the Weimar Triangle was not on the political agenda, yet some notable attempts were made, particularly in the priority areas of tripartite cooperation in defense. In order to strengthen Europe’s defense capabilities, in 2011, the countries of the Weimar Triangle jointly developed a set of Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) reforms (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024), which was supported by Italy and Spain in 2013, and thus moved the project into the format of “Weimar Plus”. The United Kingdom’s opposition to the whole concept of the EU as a strategic actor, however, left the Weimar effort unfulfilled. Later, in 2013, the Weimar countries agreed to create a joint battle group within

the European Union, where Poland would have to mobilize a large part of its military forces. Yet, other EU states did not see the need for a battle group, and thus, this Weimar attempt also failed. The Triangle was briefly involved in de-escalation during the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine, but was soon replaced by the Normandy format and the Minsk talks, and then slowly disappeared from view. The years 2015-2023, when Poland was governed by the conservative Law and Justice (PiS) party, are considered to be among the lowest periods in the history of the Weimar Triangle. The PiS was anti-German (demanding compensation for the horrors inflicted on Poland by Germany in World War II), and was generally skeptical of the European Union, which made cooperation between member states all but impossible (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024).

Based on the above, just a couple of years ago, considering the political differences between the three countries, the prospects of reviving the Weimar Triangle seemed dim, and the Union was perceived as a platform useful merely for the implementation of more socially applicable cultural and artistic initiatives. However, despite all this, the Weimar Triangle is still active, and, according to some experts, it is having a moment to lead right now.

### **What political factors led to the latest activation of the Weimar Triangle?**

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022 gave new impetus to close cooperation in foreign and security policies between France, Germany, and Poland. The first persons of these three countries met each other in the format of the Weimar Triangle as early as February 8, 2022, in Berlin, when there was still hope that Russia would not invade Ukraine (Golebiowska 2024). It should be noted here that Poland had the least hope of this, and its leader warned his Western partners about Russia's imperialist intentions, first seen when Russia invaded Georgia in 2008 and then Ukraine in 2014. In the end, Poland was proved right (Dempsey 2024).

The inefficiency of the Weimar cooperation in the field of security came as a result of the different perceptions the member states had towards the threat, their different attitudes towards NATO, and alternate visions regarding the defense of Europe. Poland always perceived Russia as a potential threat, while France and Germany still believed that Russia was an attractive partner that simply needed support on the path to eventual

liberalization and democratization. France's desire for European security autonomy [from the US] was countered by Poland's belief that US military involvement was a necessary precondition for achieving lasting peace in Europe. Moreover, Poland demanded more investment in military capabilities (which was one of the claims against the European NATO member states during Donald Trump's presidency, and for which reason the US even considered withdrawing from NATO), while France and Germany were focused on saving money. Due to these differences neither the transatlantic tensions sparked by Donald Trump's administration nor the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 served as catalysts for activating the Weimar Triangle. However, things have changed (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024).

Today, in Paris, Berlin, and Warsaw, there is no doubt that Russia poses a serious threat to the security of Europe. While there may still be differences in the three countries' visions of Europe's security architecture, it is clear that they are now on the same page regarding Russia's imperialist intentions, and all plainly see the need for strong defense and resistance. In addition, despite the fact that the USA was an unconditional leader in the international response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, generally playing a major role in maintaining peace in Europe, now its interests are directed towards the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, it is not expected that the USA will remain as strong a military partner for Europe as it was before. This fact creates a good basis for France to once again put the issue of the security autonomy of the continent on the agenda. And yet, Russia's war in Ukraine also revealed an uncomfortable truth about the state of European defense: Europe is not ready for a long war, neither in terms of its armed forces nor its industrial capabilities, which is why all three Weimar countries are now facing a rapid increase in military spending and are looking for new investment opportunities (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024).

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Poland became the most important power for security and defense on NATO's eastern flank; Germany was given the opportunity to fulfill its *Zeitenwende* promise and take responsibility for maintaining security in Europe (which it had avoided for so long), and, for France, it became an optimum time to increase its visibility in Central and Eastern Europe. However, individually, neither Poland, Germany, nor France have sufficient leverage, nor enough political weight, and, as already mentioned, they each lack the necessary resources to rebuild the

European security architecture when the hostilities in Ukraine end. That is why, only together, in the format of the Weimar Triangle (as well as in coordination with potential partners, especially the United Kingdom and the USA), can these three countries start implementing joint initiatives with a new impetus to ensure the establishment of a new, stable and peaceful security order in Europe (Gorjestani 2024).

For this purpose, on March 15, 2024, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz invited French President Emmanuel Macron and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk to the Weimar Triangle Summit in Berlin. The summit was critical, as support for Ukraine, especially between France and Germany, had grown into a seemingly unwanted competition. Paris and Berlin each sought to increase their political weight and authority by providing more political and military assistance to Ukraine than the other. Against this background, the summit somehow showed that these three large EU and NATO member states are ready for close cooperation on Ukraine, European security, and transatlantic relations (Kulesa, Terlikowski, Rotter and Geyer 2024).

That said, each member state has a personal interest in the Weimar Triangle:

- The current Prime Minister of Poland, Donald Tusk, like his predecessor Jaroslaw Kaczynski, unwaveringly supports Ukraine's victory in the war. The main reason for this is that Poland is a neighboring state to Ukraine. If Ukraine is defeated in the war, there is a high probability that Russia will annex its territories in whole or in part, which will increase Russia's border with Poland. This, in turn, will endanger the peace and security of not only Poland, but all NATO member states. However, Poland no longer has a foothold in the form of the Visegård Four (V4), as two of the four V4 member states, Hungary and Slovakia, are governed by pro-Russian leaders: Viktor Orbán and Robert Fizo, respectively (Beck 2024). Moreover, Warsaw, which was considered by Washington to be the guarantor of Europe's security, may be fearful of the upcoming US presidential elections, in particular, the victory of Donald Trump in these elections and his visions regarding the country's foreign policy. Poland needs strong European allies more than ever right now, and the Weimar Triangle is a good opportunity to get them.
- French President Emmanuel Macron has long been actively appealing for European security autonomy (Vohra 2023). This is made even more relevant by Donald Trump's "threat" regarding the withdrawal of



the US from NATO. France's position on the war in Ukraine changed significantly in 2024 (Schofield 2024). Macron, who even after the start of the war said that Russia should not be defeated and that neither side should be humiliated during peace talks, openly stated during the summit in Berlin that Russia's victory in the war would ultimately destroy Europe's security. Moreover, by publishing the "White Book" (the so-called Macron Doctrine) and increasing military support for Ukraine, France actually confirmed its desire to see a Russian defeat in the outcome of this war. Macron's bold moves have raised suspicions that France is preparing to ascend to the throne of Europe's security leader, yet, at the same time, by supporting Ukraine, France shows the US that Europe can defend itself better than Trump demanded of them (meaning an increase in NATO's defense budget). Macron needs the support of European countries to achieve these grandiose goals, although Germany, one of Europe's leading states, is his rival (Gotev 2024). The Weimar Triangle is a unique opportunity for France to overcome this competition and further strengthen itself through joint cooperation.

- Russia's war against Ukraine, along with the violation of the European collective security system, has called into question the main approaches of German foreign policy (especially the use of non-military means in the conduct of foreign policy), which, on February 27, 2022, was named a "turning point" (Zeitenwende) in German foreign policy by Olaf Scholz. Revelation followed (Scholz 2022). Zeitenwende came as a result of several factors, one of which is the growing international pressure on Berlin from its partners for Germany to play a leading role in safeguarding the peace of Europe (Mehrer 2022). Scholz is quite cautious in his statements about the ongoing war in Ukraine; supporting Ukraine, yet deliberately not mentioning the words "victory" or "defeat" (Karnitschnig 2024). At the same time, in Germany, they believe that the "turning point" has not produced significant, tangible results even two years since its announcement, which is why it is considered ineffective and its author is bitterly criticized (Raik and Quencez 2023). That is why, for Scholz, the Weimar Triangle format is an opportunity to actually implement the Zeitenwende and meet the demands of Germany's international partners.

To sum it up, it is clear that the Weimar Triangle has returned to big politics, but to what extent this return will be justified and what it may shape in the future is still unknown.

## What changes might the Weimar Triangle undergo in the future?

The future of the Weimar Triangle depends significantly on the US presidential election, and who enters the White House from 2025. If Donald Trump wins the election, there is a high probability that he will even more actively support the implementation of the “peace plan” - the Minsk III Agreement (Leonard 2024), which, according to Mykhailo Podoliak, the adviser to the head of the administration of the President of Ukraine, will be equivalent to a slow death for Ukraine (Podolyak 2022). Indeed, the deal would freeze Ukraine’s territorial losses, leave it out of NATO and EU membership, and force demilitarization and the maintenance of permanent neutrality. The implementation of the “peace plan” will be dangerous not only for the security of Ukraine, but also for the whole of Europe, seeing revisionist aggressors stationed at the borders of about a third of the EU countries, which will naturally lead to a feeling of existential insecurity. This scenario will undermine European unity, as it will make many political leaders lose faith in the European project and force them to seek alliances with new partners, namely Trump’s USA, Xi Jinping’s China, or Putin’s Russia, as Hungarian President Viktor Orbán did. All this will ultimately divide Europe even further, leaving it vulnerable and, by all accounts, paralyzed.

Even if the reelection of Donald Trump as the President of the USA should come to pass, there is still hope of preventing this scenario, and it is, according to some opinions, connected to the Weimar Triangle. Poland’s new government is committed to strengthening Europe; Germany has significantly increased defense spending; and France supports the EU’s eastward expansion. The cooperation of these three countries has the potential to become the key to the security of the continent and the unification of European countries around the aim to achieve common geopolitical goals.

More specifically, the Weimar Triangle can contribute significantly to the European agenda in three ways:

- From a **political point** of view. As already mentioned, Poland’s membership in the Union is a cornerstone of the Weimar Triangle. Franco-German relations have often led to resentment and even feelings of exclusion among the post-socialist states (Leonard 2024). Poland’s membership in the Triangle can become a unifying factor for

[Western, Central and Eastern] Europe and may inspire hope that the leaders of the three countries will act inclusively and not unilaterally.

However, an important factor is that the Weimar Triangle, independent of the EU, has the potential to restore relations with the United Kingdom. It is true that the new British government is currently more interested in the country's domestic policy than in the realization of foreign policy ambitions, but the change in European security architecture may "force" London to reconsider the possibility of cooperation with European countries. Renewed connectivity will be particularly important to restore a sense of security in Europe. Moreover, the Weimar Triangle may cover such broad issues as defense and nuclear risks, economic security, technological competition, and energy.

- From a **military point** of view. More than 30% of European defense costs come from the countries of the Weimar Triangle (Peternoster, 2024). At the first stage, Berlin, Paris and Warsaw should develop plans to supply the necessary ammunition and air defense to Ukraine. The unification of different initiatives in the format ensures that the member states work in tandem, which, in the long term, will help them achieve success in boosting European defense and security.

In addition to the trilateral nuclear dialogue, the Weimar Triangle also has the potential to expand the role of the Eurocorps. Eurocorps (Leonard 2024) is a multinational military headquarters created in the 1990s by France and Germany. Unlike EU battlegroups, which are expeditionary and thus ill-suited to the present, the Eurocorps can be deployed in sufficient numbers to the front lines to increase the confidence of front-line nations, even if the US ever decides to pull its troops out of Europe.

- From a **long-term point** of view. Europe is now facing a clash. On the one hand, is the geopolitical need to have Ukraine and Moldova join the Western structures, and on the other, this necessity is opposed by the political and institutional impossibility of the classical expansion process. The Weimar Triangle can resolve this conflict. The Union should develop a long-term plan for the accession of Ukraine and Moldova to NATO and the European Union. In order to speed up the process, the European Commission is already working on reforming the institutional mechanisms of enlargement proposed by France and Germany (European Commission, 2024). Moreover, the European

Union opened negotiations with Kyiv and Chisinau (Michel 2024), which can be evaluated positively. However, there are several steps to be taken before joining. To speed up this process, the Weimar Triangle can convene a high-level group that will study the process of EU enlargement in terms of security and defense components, and promote the political integration of the two Eastern European states of Ukraine and Moldova into Europe. It is significant that the possibility of a connection between Ukraine and the Weimar Triangle was already recognized in 1997, and presented in a work by the famous diplomat and political scientist Zbigniew Brzezinski (Brzezinski 1997). Now, several decades on, this prediction may finally become a reality.

## **Conclusion**

The Weimar Triangle, during its existence, has probably never been more necessary for the unity and stability of Europe than it is now. Russia's invasion of Ukraine united the leading states of Europe against a common enemy, "forcing" them to converge their positions and start cooperation to achieve common goals. In doing so, the Weimar Triangle returned to its original purpose of political dialogue and cooperation. The leaders of France, Germany and Poland were able to meet several times in the format of the Weimar Triangle, and expressed their desire to act according to a common plan. The member states need the Weimar Triangle to achieve both joint and individual goals: Poland - to have strong partners, Germany - to effectively implement the *Zeitenwende*, and France - to ensure the autonomy of European security.

Based on the reasoning developed above, it is clear that the Weimar Triangle will have the power to play an important role in the geopolitical agenda of Europe, within the framework of political, military and long-term cooperation, to ensure the creation and maintenance of European unity in order to strengthen the defense and security of Europe.

It can be said that the Weimar Triangle is indeed at a moment of leadership, although how successfully it can adjust to the leadership position will depend largely, but not only, on Olaf Scholz, Emmanuel Macron and Donald Tusk.

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