

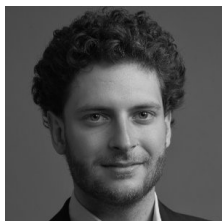
More Than Just a Ticking Clock: The New Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly

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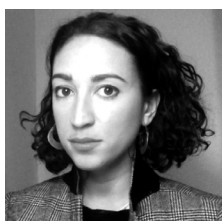
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The authors run the Mercator European Dialogue, a network of members of parliaments from across the EU created in 2015 and run by the German Marshall Fund. The project applies innovative dialogue techniques to policymaker workshops with 15–60 participants to build trust between members of different parliaments and parties, to empower national parliaments as institutions of democratic representation in the European policy arena, and to test and develop new convening methods on big policy questions of European relevance.

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The first meeting of the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly and the ticking clock taking center stage © Bundestag / Sylvia Bohn

On March 25, the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly met in Paris for the first time. Richard Ferrand, the president of France's National Assembly called it a "historic day." This new institution has received little media attention, but it is the result of an unprecedented collaboration between two parliaments at the heart of the European project. If administered innovatively, it could set a precedent in the field of interparliamentary dialogue in Europe, showcasing how the future of cooperation can count on other champions than governments.

In September 2017, France's President Emmanuel Macron in a major speech at the Sorbonne University called for a follow-up to the 1963 Elysée Treaty between France and Germany to deepen their relations and to revive a divided EU. The process stalled for over a year as neither side was ready to commit to the idea. But, while the two governments were stuck in an impasse, the two

parliaments kept striving for greater synergies and cooperation.

In January 2018, the National Assembly and the Bundestag adopted a joint resolution reinforcing the role of the two parliaments in Franco-German relations. A working group, comprising nine members from each legislature, was tasked with drafting an agreement to set up a joint parliamentary chamber. The group met regularly throughout the year and played a crucial role in stepping up the negotiations that led to the new Treaty of Aachen between the two countries, which was signed in January 2019.

Proposals for common objectives on social standards and corporate-tax harmonization, strongly pushed by the parliamentarians, were scrapped from the treaty's final text, which was then later criticized for being overly vague. Yet, the

efforts of the working group continued until March, when the National Assembly and the Bundestag adopted the agreement that laid the foundations of the very first Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly. This, rather than the Aachen Treaty, is the real innovation in Franco-German relations today.



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A New Kind of Inter-Parliamentary Debate

The new joint parliament has the ambition of “promoting a new and positive culture of debate” through “lively discussions on uncomfortable issues,” including eurozone reform, a European army and energy-related issues such as coal and nuclear power. Each country has 50 representatives, replicating the proportions of party groups in their national houses. They will analyze the legislative proceedings in progress at the EU level and will be able to propose joint, but non-binding, resolutions to their parliaments.

Expectations that this new initiative will add a new dimension to European politics are very high among those who are involved in it. During the inaugural session, Germany’s Minister of State for Europe Michael Roth said:

The only way to improve Europe is to talk with—not about—one another. Our two countries now have the opportunity to cooperate more closely than ever before. I hope that the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly will be strongly characterized by the things that make our friendship so special: openness, eagerness to engage in dialogue, debate the issues and find viable compromises that strengthen and unify Europe.

A survey of participants in the Mercator European Dialogue network of members of parliaments from across the EU that were involved confirms these

expectations. The comment of Alexander Kulitz, a member of the Bundestag, provides a good summary of their views:

As a supranational experiment, the EU struggles with its own institutional framework and the decision-making process; therefore, a new way of coordinating national law-making procedures might be a perfect complementary service to the union. If this experiment turns out well, it could be good to have similar cross-national assemblies all over Europe. My expectation would be that national laws become a touch more coherent by helping to take decisions together with neighboring countries rather than taking them alone, and without pulling the power from the EU level, which might also help citizens to better accept such joint cross-border regulations.

An Opportunity Waiting to Happen

The first session of the assembly was livestreamed online.¹ Much like any other parliamentary session, it was dominated by formal interactions and offered no space for spontaneous discussions. German members of parliament were flown into Paris early on a Monday. For a full day they sat in a room with their French counterparts, whom they had never met before. From their seats they could barely see their faces, let alone read their name-holders. During the morning session, the spokespersons of the 14 parliamentary groups read statements one after the other, while a big clock at the center of the room was ticking away. In the afternoon, another 30 members intervened in plenary for a maximum of two minutes each. There was no question time. All statements were simultaneously translated. Opportunities to network were limited to the lunch break.

One has to ask to what degree this set-up, replicating traditional parliamentary procedures, can deliver the full potential of the joint assembly, the success of which could have significant positive implications for the European project. Are these the best possible conditions for encouraging politicians of different political beliefs and different political cultures to engage in meaningful exchange? Will members be able to make progress on substantive and controversial issues? Is the assembly equipped to fulfil its ambitions?

¹ Watch the [Morning Session](#) and the [Afternoon Session](#).

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As politics across Europe is perceived as increasingly unresponsive, and as dissatisfaction with the performance of institutions threatens to alienate even more citizens from the political system, too little thought is put into adapting and upgrading the way policymakers interact with each other. The opportunities for national parliamentarians to meet their peers in other countries and to engage in constructive dialogue and genuine exchange with them are limited. If the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly is to be an institution that can scrutinize the work of the two governments on European matters—thus contributing to unblocking policy issues that have long been stalled, disentangling controversial ones in a constructive manner, and coming up with fresh policy proposals—it is necessary to redesign the way it convenes.

The new body could break with business-as-usual procedural stiffness and rethink the dialogue space it provides. Even small changes can increase the quality of participation and the outcomes of the process, without a complete overhaul of parliamentary protocol. Political practitioners, scientists, and civil society organizations have long developed tools that enable more personal and impactful conversations, but the political sphere often lags behind. Based on the Mercator European Dialogue experience, two simple ideas can make the joint parliamentary assembly more fit for purpose.

Making the Parliamentary Assembly Fit for Purpose

First, to promote open dialogue between people who do not just come from different parties, but also different political cultures, and to establish a trust-building atmosphere among them, it is key to vary formats, such as plenary sessions, thematic discussion tables, parallel working groups, informal committees. Rather than a rigid structure in which participants are not able to intervene or cluster

debates, this facilitates efficient cooperation and produces lasting interest in future exchanges.

The frequency of interactions should also be taken into consideration. The Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly will only convene twice a year and its members will rotate, giving them little time to get to know each other, before they will eventually meet during the plenary sessions. All the more reason, therefore, to make sure those meetings are as effective and provide as much opportunity for real conversation as possible.

A study of the Conference of European Committees of the national parliaments in the EU and the European Parliament (COSAC)—one of the few interparliamentary cooperation mechanisms in the EU—found that “most parliaments do not consider COSAC to be the right venue for collective decision-making, instead preferring COSAC to be used as a more informal setting by increasing the number of side meetings to discuss specific legislative proposals.” The study also found that “The dominance of formal interactions is one of the reasons why COSAC meetings are not viewed as very valuable.” These are lessons that can be applied to the work of the new joint assembly.

Second, as the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly will attempt to build consensus on historically divisive issues such as security and defense, exchanges among the participants should be designed in a way that encourages them to engage in effective communication. Too often, when dealing with such major and complex systemic issues, the tendency is to minimize tensions by rushing into problem-solving mode. Instead, the new assembly should follow a more explorative rather than prescriptive approach, allowing policymakers to better understand other political perspectives and hence enriching their diagnosis of the policy challenges. In order to pursue the ambitious task of reaching broad consensus across as many political voices as possible and finding new grounds for compromise, supplementary processes should be encouraged.

A report on effectiveness in interparliamentary conferences states that “The ever-changing nature of interparliamentary meetings and actors responsible for them, as well as the diversity of national parliamentary procedures, makes it more difficult to ensure an even preparation and follow-up.” In short, they are dysfunctional because they fail to overcome administrative and logistical hurdles. Unless parliamentarians feel personally and actively involved, which the procedures of interparliamentary cooperation tend to discourage,

“any possible insights are likely to remain isolated from wider parliamentary considerations,” reducing the impact of such gatherings.

In today’s debates on the future of Europe, there is a serious need to increase the quality of deliberation, to foster a more meaningful exchange of ideas, and to rethink political compromise to include the broadest possible number of stakeholders. Failure to deliver on higher-quality political processes will only translate into further uncertainty, undermining the success and the credibility of new mechanisms, and increasing the chance of producing policies that may not have the intended results.

The national parliaments of France and Germany should dare to be innovative with their new joint enterprise. The changes outlined above are easy to implement as they ultimately depend on the willingness of the actors involved to make use of them. At a time when the notion of European cooperation is increasingly contentious, the Franco-German Parliamentary Assembly could be the first forum to design a dialogue space with the ability to fully unleash the untapped power of interparliamentary cooperation.



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