

# The Franco-German partnership and

Interview by the  
Tirana Times with the  
German and French  
Ambassadors to Albania,  
H. E. Susanne Schütz and  
H. E. Bernard Fitoussi

*- This interview is taking place on the anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, a treaty of friendship between France and Germany signed by President Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer in Paris on 22 January 1963, less than two decades after the end of the Second World War. Franco-German partnership has been the bedrock of stability and prosperity in Western Europe ever since. What did this agreement do for Europe in the sense of cementing peace, reconciliation and reconstruction?*

**French Ambassador:** Less than 20 years after France and Germany had lost millions of people in the most dreadful catastrophe of their history, two heroes drew up an incredible plan, namely to make Franco-German friendship the cement of reconciliation between our two nations and the engine of European hope. The Elysée Treaty stands for a cement of peace and an engine of prosperity.

One of the fruits of this treaty is the Franco-German Youth Office (FGYO). In concrete terms, more than eight million young Germans and young French people have crossed the Rhine since 1963 to live in the neighbouring country for a few weeks. My own children experienced this adventure. This is undoubtedly the only case in history where a treaty has genuinely and profoundly changed the mentalities of entire generations. The Western Balkans have now decided to carry out a similar experiment by creating the Regional Youth Cooperation Office of the Western Balkans (RYCO). This is a historical opportunity.

For more than 50 years, the Elysée Treaty has withstood all tensions and changes. During each period, a French President and a German Chancellor worked side by side. Franco-German friendship was thus able to face the greatest challenges after the fall of the Berlin Wall. German reunification and the reconstruction of Europe were gradually made possible thanks to the power of this friendship.

**German Ambassador:** I would like to add that in my view it is a very good tradition to commemorate the anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, as this provides us with an occasion to reflect on what has been possible and which great achievements have been accomplished in the past decades. Since the signing of the Treaty, the partnership between our two countries has become one of the cornerstones of European stability. The secret of the strength of the Franco-German engine within the European Union is that our governments work very closely together to establish common positions, which then very often serve as a basis for



French and German Ambassadors to Albania, H. E. Bernard Fitoussi and H. E. Susanne Schütz.  
Copyright: German Embassy in Tirana

EU positions shared by all EU member states. The fact that France and Germany, as long-standing "sworn enemies", were able to develop such a close friendship and partnership shows that nearly everything is possible through diplomacy and the will to overcome obstacles and prejudices.

*- In essence, the same Franco-German partnership remains the engine that keeps the European Union going today. What does this partnership look like today?*

**German Ambassador:** Our partnership is strong, dynamic and vibrant. And this is also necessary because we are facing many challenges in the world today. The Elysée Treaty became a foundation for intensive bilateral cooperation in politics, the economy, culture and society. Our cooperation is multifaceted and very concrete, with our governments meeting regularly in the Franco-German Ministerial Council and taking joint decisions on crucial issues for our countries.

To give you just a few examples: since 2014 we have been working closely together in the framework of the Normandy format to tackle the Ukraine crisis. Other joint initiatives by our governments include a joint visit by our Foreign Ministers to Mali and the Niger in the framework of the EU Migration Partnership to address the root causes of migration. And the first Franco-German Embassy in the world, which will serve as a joint workplace for German and French diplomats, is currently being built in Bangladesh.

In the face of the terrorist attacks that have hit both our countries, we are liaising closely to counteract the threat of terrorism. Of course, our economies are also closely interconnected and our Ministries of Labour are currently working on an action plan aimed at further enhancing labour mobility in our two countries. Our nations are also intertwined when it comes to culture, where

we enjoy exchange on all levels. Since 1963, more than eight million young people have participated in exchanges organised by the FGYO. There are around 4,300 Franco-German school partnerships; some 2,200 towns are twinned; and of course French and German universities work closely together. In 2003, our governments also set up a bilateral cultural fund, which supports dozens of Franco-German cultural projects in various countries each year. And let's not forget ARTE, the Franco-German television channel that was founded in 1991! All these activities show that our bilateral cooperation has a very special and wide-ranging quality of its own.

**French Ambassador:** As Susanne has just described in concrete terms, this Franco-German engine works every day. When an event occurs in the world, a French diplomat's automatic response is to ask "What does Berlin think?" This means that French and German diplomats think simultaneously about the interests of their country and of the Franco-German relationship.

We confront major events, such as those that occur in daily diplomatic life, in constant exchange with each other.

*- What does the future of the Franco-German partnership look like? Brexit shook the EU, but anti-EU forces have also gained ground politically in both France and Germany. Some fear that one of these forces could come to power, i.e. the French National Front, or play a role in future governments, i.e. Alternative for Germany. Is there a chance this scenario could lead to the collapse of the European Union, and what can be done to make sure that the European project not only survives but also thrives in the face of massive challenges?*

**French Ambassador:** Franco-German

friendship is a major intrinsic fact that lies at the heart of the fundamental values of our two nations. This friendship is not contingent on circumstances. It does not depend on majorities or a particular situation. Any French or German person who intends to participate in the government of their country knows that they will have to live not with, but in the Elysée Treaty.

For French people, Europe is not a diplomatic period like any other – it has become an integral part of our national project. It is true that some aspects, institutions and ways of functioning of the European project can be criticised or reformed, but not its essential spirit. Geography brought us together to make the continent a model of peace, prosperity and respect for human values.

**German Ambassador:** Without a doubt, the European Union is facing many challenges at the moment. But at the same time, all these challenges prove that the European Union is needed more than ever. Talking about security, migration, economic growth or climate change – to name just some of the pressing issues – it becomes obvious that these issues can only be solved if we work together. The EU is working to promote peace and stability in Europe and around the world through its Common Foreign and Security Policy. The fact that the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012 is a recognition that also entails an obligation. By working together, our efforts to help shape tomorrow's world can have a greater impact than if member states, even large ones such as Germany or France, go it alone.

*- Let's move on to some questions focusing specifically on the Balkans. What kind of lessons can be learned from Franco-German history on the benefits of moving from antagonism to friendship, especially keeping in mind that we live in the Balkans, where there was armed conflict just two decades ago? There have been efforts to apply lessons from Franco-German partnership to the region, such as in initiatives like the RYCO. Why are you supporting these initiatives and what is the end goal?*

**German Ambassador:** I think everything my French colleague and I have said so far shows that there are lessons to be learned from Franco-German history and that these lessons might serve as an example for the Balkans. We firmly believe that the European Union remains the largest and most successful peace project since the Second World War – also with a view to the Western Balkans. This is also why our two countries are very active in the region, for example through the Berlin process launched by Germany, France, Austria and Italy in 2014. One of the initiatives within this process was the foundation of the RYCO, which we strongly support. In our view, this provides a unique opportunity to bring the young generation in the region closer together and to overcome prejudices and distrust. The last two years have already shown the benefits of such an initiative, with young people from the six participating countries of the Western Balkans working

# lessons for the Western Balkans

closely together in a working group to establish the terms and objectives for future cooperation. In the near future, an elected Secretary General will start working in the recently opened office in Tirana, and the first exchange projects will be carried out. The whole process has been monitored and supported by experts from the FGYO and I am happy to see that the experiences of French-German youth exchange and reconciliation work served to inspire the process in the Western Balkans. As Bernard already mentioned, one of the driving forces to achieve this special friendship has been the FGYO, ever since its foundations were laid by the signing of the Elysée Treaty by President de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer. Today's Franco-German friendship is a friendship not only on the political level, but also a real friendship between nations and people in the sense that many Germans have very close personal ties with people in France and vice versa. This makes friendship between countries tangible and solid.

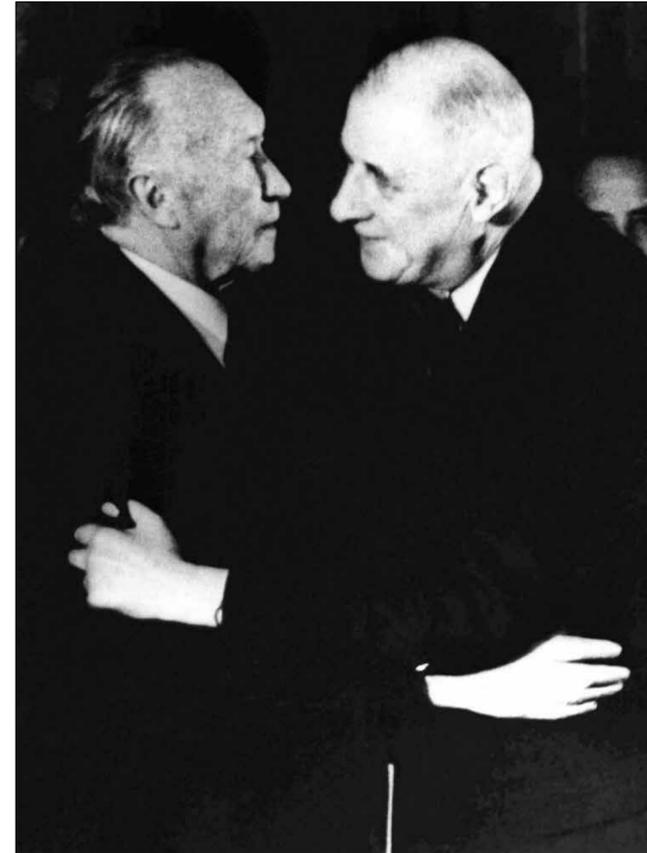
**French Ambassador:** As my German colleague expresses very well, we believe that the Franco-German example can serve as a role model for our friends in the Western Balkans. In every sense of the word, we ask that you do not follow the bad example of the relations between France and Germany, which were torn apart for centuries, leaving only full cemeteries behind them! Instead, please take the good example of the civilising invention that is the construction of Franco-German friendship, as no one has anything to gain from hatred or rivalry.

Following the summits in Berlin and Vienna, the Paris Summit between the EU and the Western Balkans held last July has led to concrete results: roads, railways and energy networks are being built at this very moment thanks to the Berlin process, which is rooted in a process initiated in Brdo-Brijuni.

*- Since we are speaking about the region's EU membership bid, there is growing concern that the region is moving backwards rather than forwards and that an EU in crisis will mean membership will take another decade or two, if it takes place at all. From the German or French position this timetable might be fine, but it will be of great cost to progressive pro-EU forces in the region. Are the EU, and its key members, which you represent, applying more stringent criteria for the Western Balkans than they did for Bulgaria and Romania, as some believe? If so, is that fair?*

**French Ambassador:** Since at least 2003 and the Summit of Thessaloniki, France and Germany have made a firm commitment to integrating the countries of the Western Balkans into the European Union. There has not been a year since then without a politician, whether German or French, reiterating this commitment. Procedures, experts and significant amounts of money have been put in place to help these countries make their way towards EU membership.

Both France and Germany recognise the remarkable efforts made by Albania,



First Federal German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer (l.) and Charles de Gaulle, President of France, during the signing of the Elysée Treaty on Jan. 22, 1963.  
Copyright: German Federal Government/Schwahn



German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Francois Hollande speak at a joint press conference in Berlin on Dec. 13, 2016.  
Copyright: German Federal Government/Guido Bergmann

for example regarding progress on the implementation of the rule of law. I know that, seen from Tirana, the road may seem long, but the dictatorship was abolished only 26 years ago. From one of the poorest countries in the world, Albania is now an emerging economy.

I understand Albania's impatience as a sign of great interest in the EU, which is perhaps a little lacking in old Europe at times. But I say to our Albanian friends that I do not believe in the possibility of a reversal.

What counts is not the date of arrival, which no one knows, but rather the fact that the country is continuing to advance, with its German and French friends at its side.

**German Ambassador:** Our countries are sticking to their firm commitment to the prospect of EU membership for all the Western Balkan countries if they so desire and if they meet the prerequisites. And we can see very clearly in Albania that the prospect of EU membership has

so far been an important incentive for the implementation of tough but necessary reforms, e.g. in the justice sector. Much progress has been made in the past years. Albania was awarded candidate status in 2014 and is now striving to launch accession talks. But for all of these steps, clearly defined criteria must be met. And we can assure you that the German Government stands ready to support Albania and the other countries in the region in taking the necessary steps to move closer to EU membership. This is also in our own interest, as the Western Balkans are an integral part of Europe.

*- Franco-German partnership during the Cold War had the financial and security backing of the transatlantic partnership, while the Balkans now face a growing Russian influence that does not necessarily want Albanian and Serbs to follow the same model. The recent presidential elections in the US bring a lot of uncertainty. Are Germany and France willing to continue taking a leading role in the region as they have done in recent years?*

**German Ambassador:** The European Union is more important than ever and Chancellor Merkel has just said that it is Europe's responsibility to shape its own future. The Franco-German partnership will remain a strong foundation for the European Union – a project of peace and common values. The past years have shown that our commitment to the region is constantly growing. The Berlin process launched in 2014 reaffirms this commitment. This series of five summits planned until 2018 will bring together the Prime Ministers, Foreign Ministers and Ministers for Economic Affairs of all Western Balkans countries, as well as all relevant stakeholders from the European Union and international institutions. The objectives of the Berlin process are to highlight the substantial progress achieved in the region, to reconfirm and reinforce the prospects of all countries in the region joining the EU, and to accelerate reforms, enhance economic opportunities and encourage cooperation in the region. But apart from the Berlin process, our countries remain active in the region through a broad variety of activities, ranging from substantial development cooperation to support and assistance in the ongoing transformation of the political systems, economies and societies in the region. Peaceful, stable, and democratic Western Balkan countries are in the strategic interest of the European Union.

**French Ambassador:** In a world that is changing so fast, there never are many certainties, so those that remain must be preserved. Franco-German friendship, the European project and our support for the European integration process of the Western Balkans are among these few certainties.

That is why we are convinced that the civilising model of the Elysée Treaty is also the best example for our friends in the Western Balkans. It is the only one that rejects internal archaic temptations and useless external pressures. It is the right path to peace, prosperity and the defence of human values.