

European interview

n°266

13<sup>th</sup> May 2025

# «We need to find the 'coalition of the willing' to bypass current obstacles.»

**Europe is entering a period of significant geopolitical changes — with war at its borders, a radically changing transatlantic relationship, and a growing need for internal cohesion. Against this backdrop, Poland currently holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union. From your perspective, how would you define Poland's strategic moment within the European Union today?**

Poland finds itself in a pivotal juncture within the EU, and also within the wider geopolitical environment. The EU Council presidency has come at a time when Europe is facing immense external and internal challenges. Obviously, the key strategic issue for Poland - as a front-line state - is ensuring European security. This is the watchword of the Polish presidency because it is important to find a coherent European response. Poland is also still, despite what is happening in Washington D.C., advocating for strong transatlantic cooperation. There is a clear feeling of urgency to secure proper capabilities needed to address challenges, such as defending both Europe and Poland's borders, and deterring Russia from another imperialist adventure, which might subsequently be aimed at the Poles. The EU Council presidency is tricky because on the one hand, there is an expectation for the country that holds it to lead, but on the other, when you look at the treaties and the actual power the respective country holds, then the presidency is rather about agenda setting, moderating debates, seeking ways to broker a consensus. Although the presidency carries weight, what is even more critical today is to enhance European capacity to form coalitions, for example within the Weimar Triangle format, which would allow us to have a more flexible approach

for cooperation among EU members and with non-EU partners, including the UK. This is what we need to face today's immediate problems. The EU and the NATO are very important, but we also need to develop other formats within our ranks with like-minded countries, but also with those we need to win over as far as our ideas are concerned.

**What is the strategic significance of the new Franco-Polish treaty, signed on 9th of May?**

We need to remember that this treaty replaces the one of 1991. At that time, just after Poland regained its independence, the Polish government first sent signals, also to Paris, that it wanted to be part of the EU, the then European Economic Community. The response from our Western European partners was: *"Let's not talk about it yet. This is not going to happen soon."* It was the first time that this request had been formulated though. The context when the first treaty was signed was entirely different. The USSR still existed. This is why, from today's perspective, it was necessary to replace the original agreement. Circumstances have changed profoundly: Poland is now an EU member state and the challenges it faces together with France are not the same as in 1991. Today, it is also even more vital to find a way to more effective ways of cooperation, especially in defence and security. This treaty goes further than that, since it also addresses energy transition, economic competitiveness, technology, etc. France has similar treaties with some other European partners, for example with Germany, Italy, Spain, and the UK as well. For Poland, joining this informal "club" carries symbolic weight. For now, of course, it is just a framework, and we cannot expect too much of it and not too quickly. However, it sends an important

«We need to find the 'coalition of the willing' to bypass current obstacles.»

---

message domestically: Poland is in the game when it comes to shaping Europe's future, alongside France and other partners. Poland is developing similar agreements with the UK, and other EU member states. This treaty should be seen as an opportunity to forge and formalize deeper bilateral relations. But we must also be realistic: the treaty is full of good ideas, but it needs to be filled with concrete targets and deliverables. Otherwise, it is going to become a victim of political volatility in Poland, or in France.

**Do you see this treaty as a step toward a broader realignment of alliances within the EU?**

Yes, especially after January 2025, when we faced a dramatic shift in the US' posture towards the EU, and to Europe more largely. At the same time, we found ourselves in a kind of an intellectual and strategic vacuum. Within the EU, we have now the *ReARM Europe* initiative and proposals to cut Russian oil and gas supplies, and this is positive. But we also need to invest in bi- and multilateral cooperation within the EU, for instance through mechanisms like the Weimar Triangle or the newly signed Franco-Polish treaty. If we look at Franco-German relations, or French-UK relations, not everything is smooth or working well - there are some disagreements. This is natural, but the challenges that we are facing require all of us to find as many ways as possible to be proactive and to overcome today's differences. We need to find some creative ways to bypass obstacles - such as the Hungarian positions on Russia, the Ukraine, the war, EU integration and enlargement - but we also need to keep the EU as coherent as possible. That said, the EU moves slowly. It needs time to adapt and change. Even though the threats and problems are immediate, it is often difficult for the EU to act in a timely manner.

**How can the Weimar Triangle be revitalized to play a more active role, particularly regarding security and defence?**

When it was created, the Weimar Triangle was a great idea, and it seemed to be an ideal framework because it connected the two countries that are

considered to be the engine of the EU, together with the biggest aspiring country to become a member in 2004. For some time, however, it has only been used for show. Now, its significance seems to be growing again, given the number of meetings and statements coming from the three countries, Poland, Germany, and France. The new German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, for example, was first in Paris, then in Warsaw, signaling the need for serious cooperation. There are currently two approaches: either we have to focus on some concrete measures, specifically in security and defence - the most pressing issues now - and then using the momentum to build more cooperation around these achievements; the other approach would be to look for a strategic vision first, and then to structure our cooperation around that. In my opinion, we need the first approach. The time of the Weimar Triangle when it was simply used for photo-ops is over. We need more substance. Currently, in the three countries, there is an intention to take some concrete steps. Obviously, key questions remain: What should the purpose of the Weimar Triangle be? And what should be done about transatlantic relations right now? Where should we go from here? There are still many details to be worked out.

**Is there a common perception between France, Germany, and Poland, of the new transatlantic relation?**

We are close to each other when it comes to understanding threats and uncertainties, but as far as both current and future US policy is concerned, we are divided. As France and Germany take on board the new situation they would like to provide the debate about European strategic autonomy with new impetus. This effort is based on the assumption that the U.S. may withdraw from its traditional role—despite Emmanuel Macron's active efforts to engage with Donald Trump and ease tensions between the U.S. and the EU. Germany is in a shaky position in this regard. During the Biden administration, Germany directly followed Washington's lead when it came to strategic and security issues. Now Donald Trump has reneged on this and we can all remember J.D. Vance's speech in Munich in detail. This happened well before

the AfD (Alternative for Germany - Alternative für Deutschland) having been recognized as an extremist organisation, but one must remember the strong support given by US officials to this party during its electoral campaign. This is a very peculiar situation. Germans still have some hope that they can achieve both: i.e. developing our own European capabilities and at the same time not losing sight of the US as a key security provider. In Poland, people are aware of all the risks emanating from the US right now, and we are listening very carefully to what Donald Trump and his people are saying about the war, Russia, Ukraine, and their vision of the new global order. However, we have more skin in the game than our Western partners because of our geographic position that we share with the Baltic States. If something happens, we know that NATO is, for now, irreplaceable. The U.S. continues to offer capabilities that Europe simply cannot match at this stage. For pragmatic reasons, US support remains crucial for Poland. Often this is interpreted as some sort of traditional Polish-US friendship rooted in historical experience — and to a certain extent — this is true. But, if Russia does what we think it might do, then the key question is who can provide us with what and when to help us defend ourselves? The US has still many advantages over European allies. Additionally, some members of the political elite in Poland and also part of Polish society fear that major European states see Poland as a sort of appendix. With all the awareness of asymmetries that we have within the triangle, France and Germany have their strengths— and so does Poland. We must use this platform to recalibrate our position, seek balance, and develop joint initiatives within the EU that reflect shared strategic interests.

it truly means. Poland is aware that Europe needs to take more responsibility for its security. In this sense, Donald Trump and his administration are right, and this is, at least, one positive aspect of this US administration. This has provided us with sufficient drive to do something together. In this sense, we need more European strategic autonomy and more European capabilities. We need to know that we can face collectively the Russian, the Chinese, and other potential challenges. However, from the Polish standpoint, decoupling from the US is not an option. And we cannot operate on the assumption that the US is already gone. If we all start doubting the US as a security provider, then we will be falling into the trap of a self-fulfilling prophecy, unintentionally accelerating the process we fear. Poland has another approach: we must do whatever we can to keep the US engaged and onside, to maintain dialogue, and to understand their position. This does not mean just going along with their position, but using this process to convince them that what has been happening in Ukraine affects US interests. At the same time, it is important to repeat that if anything happens in the Indo-Pacific theatre, the US will need us as allies. Many members of the US administration understand perfectly what is happening, and they are reaching out to Europe in a bid to smooth out those differences. This is why we need to stop thinking about decoupling from the US. Of course, there might be some potential tipping points like US troops leaving Europe or the US leaving NATO, but this seems highly unlikely. So let us do whatever we can do to minimize the costs of transatlantic divisions because the stakes are high. Even if success seems uncertain, it is worth trying. This is the, in essence, the Polish position.

#### **How do you interpret Poland's current positioning on European strategic autonomy?**

*Strategic autonomy* used to be a forbidden phrase in Poland. It was seen as a French idea - rightly so, as it was originally championed by the French government. But the issue is not the phrase itself; it's what lies behind it. Now is the right moment for Poland and France to have an honest conversation about what

#### **What is the purpose of the "Weimar+" initiative?**

Weimar+ includes the Weimar Triangle and Spain, Italy, the UK and occasionally also Ukraine. The purpose is very simple: it is to foster consensus on security and strategic issues and find an additional platform to understand what we can do together as a "*coalition of the willing*". Across the EU, several such formats are currently being developed, often

«We need to find the 'coalition of the willing' to bypass current obstacles.»

---

involving non-EU partners as well. This reflects the need for urgent action - and we know that the EU cannot fully deliver on every front. "Coalitions of the willing" represent a flexible mechanism that can be used to push some processes forward. However, they also carry certain risks: while they can be effective in the short term for crisis management, they are not a substitute for a comprehensive, unified strategy for the broader European community.

**What role should Poland play in EU enlargement, regarding Ukraine and Moldova? And the Western Balkans?**

Poland remains a strong advocate of EU enlargement. There is a consensus that Ukraine and Moldova deserve the European path, and they belong to Europe politically, culturally, and historically. Georgia is a more complex case due to recent political developments. Poland sees enlargement as a strategic imperative for stability and prosperity. For Poland, the European Union has provided a great deal of stability based on welfare - produced by our own efforts, but also amplified by EU membership. Around 60% of Poles [are in favour](#) of Ukraine membership. This looks positive, but a more nuanced look at this figure is required. Of the 60%, 20% are in favour of fast-track membership, because Ukraine deserves it, because of the war, and because we need to stop thinking in bureaucratic terms about integration. 20% think that Ukraine has to fulfil the Copenhagen criteria, as every candidate does. And 20% are of the opinion that Ukraine deserves the European path, but it also needs to solve bilateral Polish-Ukrainian problems: these are mostly related to historical grievances or agricultural issues. This shows that we all need to do our homework, we, the Poles plus the Ukrainians. We need to measure in an honest way the costs and benefits of enlargement, long- and short-term. Otherwise, we risk basing decisions on myths and over-expectations. We need to be very careful when addressing our own societies. When Poland was entering the European Union, there was a lot of absurd talk about Polish plumbers stealing French jobs from the market. This topic made it to the front pages of many newspapers. This happened

in the era prior to social media, but now we have even more tools to create false images, artificial fears, and distribute them quickly, so we need to be careful. The paradox is that Polish political elites are pro-Ukrainian, and in favour of enlargement, but public opinion in Poland is much more hesitant. Strategically, enlargement remains important, but policymakers must address public skepticism. Much needs to be done to explain in a no-nonsense way the costs and benefits of enlargement to our own societies. Concerning the Western Balkans, Poland has been supporting their enlargement, but this topic has always been rather more marginal. Polish public debate mainly focuses on Ukraine and potential consequences of its accession, and not so much on the Western Balkans. Nevertheless, Poland is of the opinion that the Western Balkans' integration would be helpful in making Europe a more stable and a more prosperous place. Obviously, Serbia is regarded with suspicion because of its current political positioning.

**How do you assess Poland's capacity to act as a consensus-builder in today's polarized European political climate? What do you see as the main internal threats to EU unity, and how can Poland contribute to addressing them?**

The EU is a very peculiar structure, where a multitude of issues are discussed on a daily basis. I tend to look at the EU not as a benign entity of peace-loving, altruistic nations. I prefer to consider the EU as a bunch of competitive countries with their own histories, but with an internalised framework of norms, procedures and values that are based on treaties that help us solve our arguments without resorting to force. Conflicts between member states are, however, less important right now, because there is a broad consensus on the significance of external threats. The more pressing challenges now come from within. Domestically, many member states are grappling with serious issues that risk spilling over into wider tensions across the Union. The question is how to avoid a scenario when core policies coming from European institutions create negative backlash fueling anti-EU sentiment and calls for exit. Almost every member state now has a eurosceptic party.

«We need to find the 'coalition of the willing' to bypass current obstacles.»

---

It is up to the European institutions but also the national governments to prevent this resentment from reaching critical mass. Let us take, for instance, the European Green Deal: many see it as a great evil and costly imposition. We need to better explain the rationale behind such initiatives, their long-term benefits, and the ways in which they can be

improved. Clear, honest communication is essential. Right now, our focus should be on addressing the concerns and frustrations within our own societies. The strength of European unity ultimately depends on the cohesion and resilience of each individual member state. Otherwise, we will just lead ourselves into uncharted waters.

---

**Ernest Wyciszkiewicz**

Director of the Mieroszewski Centre, Warsaw

You can read all of our publications on our site:  
**[www.robert-schuman.eu/en](http://www.robert-schuman.eu/en)**

Publishing Director: Pascale JOANNIN  
ISSN 2402-614X

The opinions expressed in this text are the sole responsibility of the author.  
© All rights reserved, Fondation Robert Schuman, 2025

---

**THE FONDATION ROBERT SCHUMAN**, created in 1991 and acknowledged by State decree in 1992, is the main French research centre on Europe. It develops research on the European Union and its policies and promotes the content of these in France, Europe and abroad. It encourages, enriches and stimulates European debate thanks to its research, publications and the organisation of conferences. The Foundation is presided over by Mr. Jean-Dominique Giuliani.