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President François Hollande: French-German relations

The defeat of Nicolas Sarkozy and the victory of François Hollande (48,4% and 51,6% of votes) in the second round of the French presidential election on 6 May 2012 could have been a surprise from the perspective a few preceding months, but not weeks. The first round gave Hollande a slight advantage over his opponent, which was confirmed by opinion polls and a three-hour television debate, one of the most interesting and stormy debates since 1974, when these became part of the pre-election ritual. Holland, considered to be a rather colorless politician and an apparatchik of the Socialist Party, suddenly turned out to be a good speaker able to establish contact with the masses during large rallies and, what is equally important, face up to Sarkozy in a television duel. Journalists agreed that was the most dramatic debate since the failed clash of François Mitterrand with Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in 1974. When it comes to the substance, it revealed significant political differences. For the audience, however, the confrontation of the two completely different personalities was probably more interesting: the calm and collected Hollande and the aggressive, impetuous and sometimes insulting Sarkozy. The confrontation ended in a draw with a slight advantage on the part of Hollande. It was the end for Sarkozy, who needed a conclusive victory, especially because he did not manage to take over the electorate of the National Front. Marine Le Pen refused to support him. With a slight advantage, the French decided to support political changes or, what might be even more important, different governing style and manner of their president. Sarkozy was widely criticized for both.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, the French presidential election was closely observed because of the relatively good personal relations of President Nicolas Sarkozy and Chancellor Angela Merkel. There were certain frictions between them, but sooner or later they have always managed to find compromise solutions regarding the European Union. They continued the tradition of good personal relations set by President Charles de Gaulle and Chancellor Konrad Adenauer, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt or François Mitterrand and Helmut Kohl. They managed to find a thread of understanding even when faced with significant divergences in French and German interests. There was, however, one major difference – the French leaders used to have a natural political advantage, while within the last few years the situation has been quite the opposite. The unflattering nickname of the French President, 'Merkozy', very well reflected the weaker position of France and the domination of Germany. For Merkel, the relations with Sarkozy were, all in all, very satisfying, even if rough at times. In the end, she always got what she wanted with little concessions. The Chancellor was even ready to directly support Sarkozy in his election campaign. It would have done him more harm than good, however – the President would enter the Élysée Palace as a protégé of Germany, which the French would not like. They have already had enough of invoking the German economy as a model. Merkel's support for Sarkozy was a public secret of sort. The German press reported that the Chancellor tried to reduce the importance of Hollande's foreign visits, which proved quite successful in the case of Warsaw.

Hollande's victory can definitely be considered a spectacular failure of Merkel, which was publicly pointed out with satisfaction by the Social Democrats (Sigmar Gabriel) and the Greens (Cem Özdemir). The situation was aggravated by the results of the election in Schleswig-Holstein – unfavorable for CDU, the collapse of the politically close Dutch government and the election failure of the parties supporting the strict savings policy in Greece. Moreover, Sarkozy's defeat, rightly considered to be also a personal and political failure of Merkel, did not cause much sadness abroad, where everyone was fed up with the 'Merkozy' style diplomacy. In Berlin, anxiety rose with regard to the forecast deep changes in the European election preferences and the breakdown of the European Union into the North, supporting the strict policy of debt and budget deficit reduction, and the South, suffering from financial crisis and the grim perspective of economic recession and fast growing unemployment. If France joined the South, for Germany it would mean isolation from the European Union. In his election campaign, Hollande openly announced the renegotiation or amendment of the fiscal pact, very accurately sensing the weak points of the German project for Europe. This project, requiring significant social sacrifices, would not be widely accepted by the society during peace, seems overly pessimistic and does not give any perspectives



for the future. Hollande does not negate the necessity to balance national budgets, but he emphasizes that this has to be accompanied by energetic actions aimed at facilitating economic growth and, as a result, radically decreasing the scale of unemployment. The German Social Democrats represent a similar stance.

At first, Chancellor Merkel reacted very negatively to any mention of the renegotiation of the fiscal pact. She reminded that it was signed by 25 EU member states and that such international agreements cannot depend on an election taking place in any of these countries. The fiscal pact “is not available”, she said. But gradually she began talking not only about ‘stabilization’, but also ‘growth’ and ‘employment’. The Germans still believe that it is ‘stabilization’ that will with time facilitate ‘growth’, but they are slowly starting to give in to the new, not yet anointed French President. They are less critical, however, when it comes to increasing the freedom of action of the European Investment Bank, the European credits to finance large infrastructure projects and the expansion of the transeuropean energy network. It is not very important that some of the French ideas were known earlier and that the European Commission was in favor of them. In this case being the first and original does not matter. What counts is the political will and ability to force through specific solutions on the forum of the European Union. In reality, Hollande achieved notable success during his election campaign – he defined a problem on the European scene and necessitated the reconsideration of the social repercussions of the German project. In Germany, it is speculated that the economic reality will make him modify his stance, which might be the right thing to do to some degree, but he will not want or be able to completely withdraw from his pre-election announcements. Maybe France will not manage to cause the revision of the fiscal pact, but it will not resign from their actions for ‘growth’ and the change of accent in the European politics. It is not possible to remove ‘growth’ from the agenda of the EU leaders.

Regardless of the future policy of the new President, he introduced new elements to the EU discourse, especially related to the methods of fighting the crisis which the countries of the eurozone brought on themselves. No matter if he was right or wrong, realistic or excessive, he sent a strong signal stimulating social hopes, which was not present in the projects forced through by the Germans. Merkel was forced onto the defensive and her spiritual leadership in the European Union was called into question, even more so because cutbacks in budget expenditure do not stimulate growth, fiscal discipline deepens recession, which in turn makes it difficult to balance budgets. A vicious circle. It is not surprising that the President of the European Commission, José Manuel Barroso, immediately sent Hollande his congratulations, as he saw in him an ally in the strive for the implementation of earlier prepared projects (bonds for infrastructure projects, increase of credits for the European



Investment Bank, tax from financial transactions, utilization of the remaining structural funds). 'Hollande's main demands from his election campaign concerning the European policy suit the Commission', wrote Nikolas Busse in „Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung” (N. Busse, Wahlgewinner Barroso. Die EU-Kommision sieht in Hollande einen Verbündeten, „FAZ” from 8.05.2012). Going in the same direction, the President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi, declared that the fiscal pact needs to be quickly supplemented by a growth pact. The German Social Democrats may also turn out to be Hollande's allies. 'Die Welt' warned: 'The greatest danger for Merkel's savings plan does not come from France, which is moving left, or Greece, which is politically unstable, but from the domestic opposition. SPD puts pressure on the European growth policy and in these difficult times brutally threatens the German position in negotiations' (D. Siems, SPD macht den Hollande, „Die Welt” from 9.05.2012).

Are the relations between France and Germany facing a crisis? It is true that Sarkozy made concessions to Berlin, but one must remember that he did not do it without resistance. Had he won the election, he would probably be a more difficult partner for Merkel. On the other hand, Hollande did not carry any Burden in his relations with Germany and had much more room to maneuver. What is more, Merkel's behavior towards him was impolite, she refused meeting him before the election and quite explicitly (coarsely) interfered with the presidential campaign (Minister Guido Westerwelle was against meddling with the internal affairs of France). After Hollande had won, the Chancellor said that he will be greeted in Germany with open arms, but nobody expected these arms to be open very wide. Hollande is believed to be a pragmatist who does not become upset because of German tactlessness. He might look for some agreement, but it is unlikely that he will completely resign from the stance which gave him support in France and popularity in other European countries. Taking into consideration his campaign speeches, it seems that he wants to rebuild the stronger position of France in the relations with Germany, look for support in the smaller countries of the EU and disperse the unpleasant atmosphere surrounding the Merkel-Sarkozy 'directorate'. His weak point is obviously the economic problems of France, while the strong point – the general conviction that in the European Union little or nothing can be done against France. An open confrontation with France would be very risky and inefficient for Berlin, especially taking into consideration that, apart from certain exceptions, the European political class does not really dream of German 'leadership'.

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