

'Enough Sauerkraut and Beer'

France and Germany Celebrate 50 Years of Friendship

In a SPIEGEL interview, French politician Jacques Delors and former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer discuss tight, but sometimes complicated, relations between their countries on the 50th anniversary of the Franco-German friendship treaty.

On Tuesday, the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty that normalized relations between Germany and France after World War II, will be celebrated with great pomp and circumstance in Berlin. The treaty was signed on Jan. 22, 1963, by then-German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer and General Charles de Gaulle. The German-French friendship treaty laid the cornerstone for rapprochement after the war as well as the foundations for European unification.

The anniversary comes at a time when the two countries are drifting apart economically, the relationship is being tested politically as a result of the euro crisis, and assurances of friendship seem hollow at times

In an interview, two politicians whose familiarity with the relationship between the two countries stems from years of observation, discuss the treaty's significance: Jacques Delors, 87, who as head of the European Commission from 1985 to 1995, presided over the critical preliminary work to establish the economic and monetary union; and Joschka Fischer, 64, who advocated a "United States of Europe" while serving as Germany's foreign minister between 1998 and 2005.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Delors, did the signing of the Elysée Treaty feel like an historic event to you at the time?

Delors: The public embrace between Charles de Gaulle and Konrad Adenauer represented an unusual, even unparalleled, outbreak of emotion in the interaction between two countries. My father was 90 percent disabled when he returned from World War I. The reconciliation with Germany corresponded to his deeply felt desire that it should never happen again. For me, the emotional dimension of the Elysée Treaty is part of that. But this process began much earlier. I think one of the first significant moments was the appeal by then-French Foreign Minister Robert Schuman on May 9, 1950. It led to the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community and laid the foundation for the eventual development of the European Union.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Fischer, what did German-French reconciliation mean to you?

Fischer: The emotions are still very fresh in my mind. De Gaulle's visit to Germany, his speech in (the southwestern city of) Ludwigsburg, the service he attended in Reims with Adenauer, the brotherly kiss at the Elysée Palace, all of this triggered a rousing sense of enthusiasm. I was a schoolboy in short pants at the time, and yet I still perceived it as an immensely hopeful encounter. When I later traveled to France for the first time, I was entering a different world, and it was a revelation -- not just politically, but also gastronomically. It was an experience that made a strong impression on my generation.

SPIEGEL: So for German youth, France became a place of longing, a place onto which they could project their unfulfilled dreams?

Fischer: Eating lamb chops with green beans in a French bistro, it changed the way you felt about life. Today everyday life has become very similar in many European countries, but in those days it was still an encounter between completely different cultures.

SPIEGEL: Nevertheless, the Elysée Treaty remained unfulfilled in many ways.

Delors: The symbolic significance is far more important than the concrete implementation. The regular meetings among the French president, the German chancellor, the (government) ministers and the officials, as stipulated under the treaty, are invaluable. It means that both sides to talk to each other, even in difficult times. The Elysée Treaty was also very successful in the area of youth and culture. Nevertheless, there is room for debate over whether we've really made a lot of progress in foreign and defense policy.

SPIEGEL: Doesn't the crisis in Mali demonstrate that there is actually no common policy?

Fischer: That's not a matter of the Elysée Treaty, but one of the German government. What exactly is our foreign policy? We should support France. It doesn't necessarily have to come in the form of combat troops, even though I don't know how things will develop. But we ought to provide more intensive assistance than two transport aircraft. You can't say that al-Qaida establishing a foothold in Mali constitutes a threat to Europe and then leave the work to others. (The notion of a) common foreign and defense policy apparently doesn't exist in the minds of key members of the German government.

Delors: I understand the difficult position the German government finds itself in, for historic reasons. But I would like to experience true cooperation in foreign and defense policy at least once in my lifetime.

SPIEGEL: Is this a breakdown once again? Is the talk of steadfast friendship just a whitewash, covering up the cracks and preventing both countries from openly discussing and addressing their differences?

Fischer: We have become a family, and no one fights more than siblings. I've seen the sparks fly a few times between (former French President) Jacques Chirac and (former German Chancellor) Gerhard Schröder. But they had to deal with each other, because breaking up the relationship is simply unthinkable.

Delors: Or else the family won't survive.

SPIEGEL: Does this still apply during such an existential test as the euro crisis?

Fischer: I am convinced that the relationship between France and Germany is currently being portrayed in public as much more tense than it actually is. A hesitation, a pause and a divergence comes with every change of government. It's part of democratic change. But it's still true today that there can be no progress within the European Union without Franco-German cooperation, because both sides are powerful enough to block progress. If there is a point to the celebrations surrounding the 50th anniversary of the Elysée Treaty, it is to confront both countries with their responsibility. Friendship without responsibility is worthless.

Delors: That's why the Elysée Treaty must also remain a sort of shrine of memory. You can't analyze the presence without knowing the past and learning lessons from it. Europe threatens to lose influence in the new global balance of power, and when that happens its prosperity also suffers. I have been anxious about the decline of Europe for a long time, especially when I think about Europe's weak decision-making abilities and the challenges it faces in the world.

SPIEGEL: Do you believe that (French President) François Hollande and (German Chancellor) Angela Merkel are up to the challenge?

Delors: It's too early to make an assessment. Besides, I'm not sitting under the table when the two of them meet. But there is a disconcerting tendency to blame each other for problems. The French must understand that they can only modernize their economy under their own steam. The Germans won't do it for them. Conversely, it doesn't help when the Germans arrogantly or reproachfully look down on France's weaknesses.

Fischer: Just look at how far Ms. Merkel has moved since the financial and monetary crisis erupted. How many red lines has she crossed that she had once drawn? And how far has (former French President) Nicolas Sarkozy gone to accommodate her, so much so that he was voted out of office because he was perceived as being Merkel's lapdog? Bailout, transfer union, rescue fund, economic administration -- terms that were once taboo for the Germans and are no longer an issue today! We've made progress on integration in recent years that I wouldn't have thought possible. National crisis management doesn't lead us to our goals. All attempts to achieve German hegemony are doomed to fail, and we aren't doing ourselves any favors by pursuing them.

SPIEGEL: At the moment, Germany seems mostly adamant that France should reform itself.

Fischer: As Germans, we really have no reason to behave arrogantly toward others. The only reason we tackled labor market reforms earlier, with Agenda 2010, is that we were forced to do so by the consequences of reunification. Otherwise we would have experienced a serious crisis with our social systems. But we won't always have the edge with this up and down approach. We could fall behind again in the medium and long term. My advice is to practice modesty and,

most of all, to simply step away from this entire arrogant discussion.

SPIEGEL: Even former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, with whom you were in government, recently admonished France to pursue reforms.

Fischer: If I understood it correctly, he was merely stating his opinion. That's okay. I don't have any advice to give France. It's my impression that President (François) Hollande, the government and much of the public know exactly what needs to be done. Competitiveness is the name of the game in a world dominated by China and the United States, not by Europe.

Delors: The Germans' incredible efforts after reunification are not sufficiently appreciated in France. Instead, Germany has sometimes been accused of boosting its own competitiveness at the expense of other partners. That's nonsense. Germany did what had to be done to survive, and in doing so it set an example.

'Europe Cannot Be Tripping over Itself while Taking Baby Steps'

SPIEGEL: Is France capable of making similar sweeping changes today?

Delors: It has to be. A country can no longer be ruled with vanity. Political and psychological "war games" with Germany don't get us anywhere. The time to be arrogant is over, and everyone needs to step away from his own bit of pride. Both governments have to jointly ensure that their nations do not turn away from Europe, and not to give the other EU countries, especially those that are not members of the Euro Group, the feeling that they are traveling in a second-class car at the back of the train.

Fischer: Adenauer and de Gaulle didn't care about opinion polls. They had an historic vision. My god, what tremendous figures they were! Why are today's leaders incapable of looking that far into the future and drumming up enthusiasm for their visions? When others in the world are taking big steps forward, Europe cannot be tripping over itself while taking baby steps.

SPIEGEL: Angela Merkel has now called for a political union for Europe, following the economic and monetary union, to which the French take a more reserved approach. What do you think?

Fischer: I agree with Merkel. And I too would like to see a new treaty, but the prospect of achieving it with the 27 EU member states is an illusion for the foreseeable future. In fact, it would be dangerous at the moment, because it might lead to referendums in several countries. We need inter-governmental agreements based on the Schengen model as an interim solution.

Delors: The euro zone is incomplete. I say to the French: You don't want to give up any sovereignty? But you just surrendered some of it implicitly with the fiscal pact. What we have now isn't enough to efficiently govern the euro zone. The French have to understand that they are sitting at the table with the others and making joint decisions.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Fischer, in a much-noticed speech you gave 13 years ago, you said that wanted to see a "United States of Europe" become a reality. Do you still believe in that?

Fischer: Yes. What else should there be? I like the term, because it's provocative. Of course we're not the United States of America. Our countries have an ancient history, which is what makes them strong. But we have made a great deal of progress. Nowadays, Germany and France and all the others are only pursuing an autonomous national policy to a limited extent. The leaders of the Euro Group are already effectively Europe's economic government today. That's a phenomenal step forward.

Delors: I've always been interested in the question of how a union can be created in diversity. I never believed that the nations would disappear. There is a sense of belonging to one's own nation that only grows stronger with globalization. Populist movements are getting stronger, even in such a fervently European country as the Netherlands. I envision a federation of nations in which decisions are reached with a qualified majority. To me, that seems to be the preferable method, as compared with the European Council negotiating exhausting compromises during long nights of negotiation.

Fischer: We don't have to become closer to each other by becoming identical. Just look at Switzerland, where you have people speaking German, French and Italian. They haven't changed in terms of their cultural identity. Europe doesn't mean that we'll become a melting pot. The Germans will remain German and the French will remain French. *Vive la différence*, within the framework of shared sovereignty!

SPIEGEL: The two sides had different ulterior motives in signing the Elysée Treaty: Adenauer wanted to tie Germany to the West, while de Gaulle wanted to form a bloc against the United States and Great Britain. Haven't such different goals shaped the relationship for decades?

Fischer: It shows you how irrelevant such ulterior motives are. The Elysée Treaty is a perfect example. It facilitated the Franco-German reconciliation on which the structure of Europe was built. A few years ago, I asked Bruno Le Maire, the then French secretary of state for European affairs: When you and other members of the administration talk about Germans, what annoys you the most about us? He replied: You always want to decide everything. I burst out laughing and said: That's exactly how we feel about the French! There's a great deal of truth to that. It will never change, and it doesn't have to. If the Franco-German relationship works, it's precisely because it's characterized by this charged sense of being different, which can then lead to very productive compromises.

Delors: Friendship can't be a sentimental veil that leads our fellow citizens to believe that we are making progress. I've seen it all too often, how a German chancellor and a French president try to make the people believe there's this great friendship between them. But true friendship also includes room for differences, which we must accept. After all, we can't have the same pension system if the population develops more dynamically in one country than in the other. We're not going to make everything the same. But there is too little interaction between our countries. We must pay closer attention to our criticism of each other.

SPIEGEL: Are you advocating putting an end to hypocrisy?

Delors: I would like to see this week's celebration not descend into sentimentality. Enough with the embraces, the sauerkraut and drinking beer together. I prefer to see Merkel and Hollande publicly speak their minds. I would hope to hear both of them saying reasonable things at the celebration. They should point out how to do things better in the future. But most of all, we cannot forget the other countries, as was the case in the last three years. Franco-German cooperation is necessary, but that alone isn't enough.

Fischer: The Elysée Treaty has shaped reality, and we should certainly celebrate it. But I was an altar boy as a child. It was very moving when we celebrated mass and the Te Deum was sung. Aside from that, our knees and our backs hurt, and it was incredibly boring, especially the sermons. That's why I don't have overly high expectations for the ceremony. But I do have very high expectations for the future when it comes to everyday interactions between the two countries.

Delors: As a Catholic, I can say to you: A High Mass without faith is pointless.

SPIEGEL: Mr. Delors, Mr. Fischer, we thank you for this interview.

Interview conducted by Romain Leick and Matthieu von Rohr.

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<http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/jacques-delors-and-joschka-fischer-discuss-50-years-of-the-elysee-treaty-a-878755.html>

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