

'Oskars Lafontaine: Germany's dream and the relationship with France' from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (24 December 2000)

Caption: On 24 December 2000, in an article in the daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Oskar Lafontaine, former Leader of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) and former Finance Minister, analyses the reasons for the tensions between France and Germany.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Zeitung für Deutschland. 24.12.2000, Nr. 51. Frankfurt/Main: FAZ Verlag GmbH. "Deutschlands Traum und das Verhältnis zu Frankreich ", auteur:Lafontaine, Oskar , p. 5.

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Germany's dream and the relationship with France

By Oskar Lafontaine

'Franco-German relations, the veneer is wearing thin', 'Galling Gauls, the dialogue between the partners in Berlin and Paris is getting sharper' — this was how the press viewed Franco-German relations in the wake of the Nice Summit.

Of course, there are quarrels in every family from time to time, and friendships, too, are not always on an even keel. Admittedly, cohabitation has often come between the Gaullist leader and a consistent French foreign policy. The decision by the National Assembly that the French parliamentary elections should not be held until after the presidential elections in May 2002 shows that the French political community is conscious of this state of affairs. But if European unification has come to a stop, this is not just a result of cohabitation in France. It is increasingly apparent that the prime concern among Europe's leading politicians is to win elections at home. There is nothing inherently wrong with that. But if foreign policy is also placed solely at the service of that objective, it will soon run out of steam.

It was to be expected that, following the collapse of Communism, politics in the West would also change. There are many who seem to have concluded that European unification is no longer that important. But it suffices to look at Yugoslavia to know that European unification is something that we need urgently.

The US presidential elections have, moreover, made it clear that a foreign policy based on the unvarying assumption that America will always do everything right is a policy that has not been thought through. Since US foreign policy may also err, America needs partners on the world political stage; above all, it needs Europe. But in the absence of Franco-German cooperation, there can be no united Europe. If at the core there is no bonding of that which belongs together, it will be that much more difficult at the periphery. History has shown that it helps when leading politicians in France and Germany pursue common projects. With de Gaulle and Adenauer it was Franco-German reconciliation, with Giscard d'Estaing and Helmut Schmidt it was European economic and monetary union and the world economic summit. With Kohl and Mitterrand it was the recognition that German unity could become a reality only in combination with progress towards European unification. But where is the project common to Chirac, Jospin and Schröder? Chirac is interested in Chinese culture, Schröder is co-author of the Schröder-Blair Paper, and Jospin, who rejects that Paper, clothes that rejection in the words, 'Yes to the market economy, no to the market society'.

Chirac, Jospin and Schröder have strikingly little interest in the culture of each other's country. And yet it is only when time and thought are devoted to the culture and language of the other country that affection and mutual understanding grow, laying the basis for genuinely friendly cooperation.

What emerged in Nice is not to be taken lightly. 'Spiegel' magazine, run by German nationalist Rudolf Augstein, had this to say: 'The Germans stand to gain most from the now unstoppable enlargement towards the East. Economically — because of the new markets among our Eastern European neighbours with their traditional attachment to German workmanship. Politically — because with the accession of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, Hans-Dietrich Genscher's old dream of Germany as the central power in Europe is now coming true.'

I do not know, and have good reason to doubt, whether Hans-Dietrich Genscher dreams of Germany as a central power in Europe. He is too intelligent for that. He is well aware that, since Richelieu, a constant constituent of French foreign policy has been to prevent the rise of a central power in Europe. This touchstone of French foreign policy may be set aside only in a shared Europe. Kohl and Mitterrand realised this and acted accordingly. While they did not of course take that process far enough, there is nonetheless no sense in which the present generation of politicians are charged with 'bringing about the reunification of Europe'. This generation's predecessors have, with respect, contributed so much to the reunification of Europe that the task before us today is that of completing their work. And doing so implies our having clear ideas about what tasks should in future be dealt with by the European Union and what tasks by the Member

States. Foreign and security policy, the macroeconomic steering of economic and financial policy, including tax legislation; these tasks will in the future fall to the European Union, just as they fall within the federal remit in the USA. If the EU can confine itself to these core tasks, it will be possible to correct many of the errors to which the Brussels bureaucrats, with their obsessive concern for detail, are prone. It goes without saying that this European policy must be accompanied by a Parliament possessing genuine rights. Joschka Fischer's Berlin address has lent new impetus to this debate. We know what the reactions in Paris have been. And those reactions will remain more or less unchanged as long as the old dream of Germany as a central power in Europe continues to be dreamt.