

'Franco-German partnership put to the test' from Le Figaro (1 December 2000)

Caption: On 1 December 2000, with a view to the Nice European Council, the French daily newspaper Le Figaro outlines the tensions between France and Germany with regard to the weighting of votes in the Council.

Source: Le Figaro. 01.12.2000, n° 17514. Paris: Le Figaro. "Le couple franco-allemand à l'épreuve", auteur:Barochez, Luc de , p. 4.

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Disagreement between Paris and Berlin before the Nice Summit over the number of votes that each holds in the Council of Ministers

Franco-German partnership put to the test

Luc de Barochez

Will the Franco-German confrontation on European reform break out at the EU Summit due to open in Nice next Thursday? The French say they are sure it will not. 'As Chancellor Schröder and I keep saying, there will be no problem between France and Germany over this issue,' said President Jacques Chirac yet again in Lisbon yesterday, on the ninth stop in his tour of the European capital cities.

The dispute concerns the number of votes that each country holds in the EU Council of Ministers. The 'big' countries like France and Germany have more votes than the 'small' ones. France and the Federal Republic have been on an equal footing since the European Community was established in 1957, with ten votes each. However, since reunification, Germany has had a good third more inhabitants than France.

So the demographic logic would be that Berlin should have more votes than Paris. And, as the Nice Summit is going to discuss precisely the weighting of votes in the EU, it is a tempting opportunity for Germany to demand a level of influence commensurate with its size.

It is difficult to know whether the French are resorting to the Coué method or whether the Germans have actually given them secret assurances. Mr Chirac and Mr Schröder met in Vittel last month. They are due to see each other again tomorrow in Hanover.

French leaders make no bones about refusing to let Germany be granted more votes than France. 'I am not in favour of what is called a decoupling of Berlin and Paris,' said Mr Chirac in Madrid on Wednesday. The Head of State invoked history as the reason why he wants to maintain Franco-German parity. 'We have had a great many wars with Germany (...) One day two men, General de Gaulle and Chancellor Adenauer, said: It's idiotic, it's absurd. We are going to bring about reconciliation once for all (...) They said that they were going to devise a pact for peace on an equal footing.' The message to the Germans is crystal-clear: if you insist on having more votes than France, the Franco-German motor which has been driving Europe forward for more than half a century will not be able to work so well.

In public, Mr Schröder has emphasised the need to take account of demographic factors in power relationships within Europe. Even so, he has not said whether that would apply to relations between France and Germany. Some of his associates have crossed the line. On the French side, there has been no hesitation in describing these people, with a pinch of arrogance, as 'irresponsible'.

What position will the German Chancellor finally adopt in Nice? He will probably keep in mind the entire draft agreement on the institutional reform of the Union and hence the compensations that he might secure on other issues.